

# Raven Squadron

by Dark Gear

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Summary: The Story of a girl who grew up to be the deadliest fighter pilot known... and never got a chance to show her skills during the Covenant War. A new war is brewing however, and the UNSC needs everyone at their best. Both Spartans, and pilots alike.

## 1. A Child's Imagination

I do not own Halo or any characters that are copyright of Bungie or 343 Industries, or Ensemble (RIP Ensemble.)

I do however claim ownership of all characters I have created of my own volition (with the exception of certain characters borrowed from other writers as cameo appearances (I will credit those authors when their characters show up the first time in an upcoming chapter.) However, this story is going to build slowly up to what I have in mind, please everyone bear with me on this as I attempt to create everything. The first few chapters are not a prologue, despite how it looks.

**\*\*Raven Squadron \*\***

\_This war has cost us millions of lives, killed hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Planets glassed, space lost, families destroyed, pain and suffering rampaging across our fledgling empire. The soldiers have been able to fend off the Covenant on the ground at times, holding their own, and yet every time we win they retreat to the skies or space and bombard the homes we care for with plasma. Even our vaunted Spartans, the courageous soldiers who have been saving countless lives when they can, barely hold when they are not on their preferred area of expertise. Fighting on land. This isn't a war we can win on the ground alone. We must strive for a new solution, a new tactic, and use what we have learned from Dr. Halsey's great research as well as Covenant technology we have gained insight from to create a new project, one that can provide hope to the weary soldier on the ground and bring the fight to the enemy over their heads. I ask for funding for this project, this shadow program, as any would be well

aware of the tolerance that some in the UNSC would hold against modification of the human body. I believe I have a solution to even the odds, but it will take funding from you to be able to delve into this research. I ask for time and money from you to create hope, to create a ghost of a chance at survival. â€"Dr. Daveth Wright, HIGHCOM Facility Bravo-6, Sydney Australia\_

\*\*[1100 hours, February 9th, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, Marin County]\*\*

A little girl walked alongside her mother into the arts and crafts store, following her father that was holding her older brother on his shoulders. The shop was there for construction hobbies, toys that were made in some form, items of wonder created by the owner. The doors slid open and knocked a bell just above, and the girl looked around.

The store was cramped with items for sale, though still very large. Shelves upon shelves were stacked with model airplanes and board games, some model trains or action figures, hundreds of different colored paints and sprays. The halogen lights seemed old and yellowish, and a few bins were lying around constricting the already small isles with clearance items.

"Ok, how about we go find that perfect doll for you Elena" her mother asked. Elena looked up at her mother, and then looked around wondering where the dolls were kept. She didn't really care much for one; she didn't even like dolls, despite how her parents always seemed to think the six year old would love to get a brand new porcelain doll. She just wanted to come along because her father was there.

Ever since her birth, Elena had always had a special connection to her father. She loved her mother very much, and spent a great deal of time with her, but she enjoyed the special occasions she got when her father wasn't doing his job, which was flying pelican transports. He was a Lieutenant in the UNSC Air Force, which wasn't restricted by air anymore since humanity expanded away from Earth.

She didn't really understand what the UNSC was, but she did understand her father flew. She loved when her father would come home from transporting personnel to a nearby ship or dropping off supplies. She'd be waiting at the door until he came in, and he'd always pick her up around her tummy and fly her around the room like a plane.

Her short attention span came back to the matter at hand when her mother walked her over to the dolls held inside the glass cases, all locked up. A woman was sorting items into other shelves by a counter nearby, placing different paints and what looked to be hair and sewing kits into small slots with prices on them.

"Hello! How can I help you ma'am?" the woman asked her mother.

"I'd like to get a special doll for my daughter. It's her 6th birthday and she needs something special" her mother said smiling down at Elena. Elena's mother ran her fingers through her daughter's black hair, so black it was almost blue in the right light.

"Ah, I think I can help you with that!" the clerk chuckled and walked

out from behind the counter, and bent over with her hands on her knees, smiling at Elena.

"So it's your birthday right? Such a big girl! I bet you want just the perfect doll huh?" the clerk told her as enthusiastically as possible, trying to make it sound like a momentous occasion. It was, in a sense, but Elena somehow didn't feel it. She always was a quiet girl, her blue eyes never really brightening up unless her father was around and always seeming very down to earth and highly intelligent for her age.

"Alright, well, let us see what hair color you like! We have so many different types-" but Elena wasn't really listening, as she watched her father across the building talking to another clerk, helping her brother Milo get a new model airplane.

Elena didn't understand. She liked things that flew, she watched dragonflies zoom around in the garden when she wasn't in preschool, she tried to catch lightning bugs during the summer, and made paper airplanes often enough. Why would her mother think that she would enjoy a doll that didn't move, soar through the air free?

"Elena are you listening?" her mother asked. Elizabeth thought that her daughter would jump for joy at getting a doll, but she didn't seem very enthusiastic about it.

"I want one of those!" Elena said as she pointed in the direction Milo and her father was standing. Held in Milo's hands was a CLX-12 Mechlin, a twin turboprop engine model airplane, something that wasn't really used anymore aside for training purposes for pilots.

"But, wouldn't you rather have a cute doll? Look, look at this one! Oh, she has such a cut face! Elena! Look!" Elizabeth said, hoping to get her daughter's attention. Elena looked back at her mother and the clerk, who was unlocking different glass cases and pulling out an assortment of dolls for her to peruse.

Elena gave a quick glance at the blue eyed white faced doll and immediately turned around and stared back at her father testing the turboprops of the plane with his fingers. Milo was ecstatic. He was getting a toy on the same day his sister had her birthday.

"No! I want one of those! I want a plane mommy!" She said and darted over to her father, making zoom sounds and putting her arms out. Her father had just finished paying for the airplane when Elena came up to them and poked at the plane with her finger. Milo pulled the plane away and flew the thing around him a bit, but Elena kept trying to touch it. Jack was just putting his wallet back in his pocket when he noticed Elena there. She had always been a ghost's shadow when she wanted to be, sneaking up on people. She found it fun.

"Hey! Leave it alone! You'll break it!" Milo growled out and pulled it away from her.

"But, but I want one! I don't want a dolly! I want a plane like you got!" Elena looked disappointed she couldn't share in the fun that her eight year old brother was having with his new aerial construct. The little girl looked up at her father, Jack, for help.

"Err, well, you really don't want a doll?" Jack asked her just as her mother came over, thanking the other clerk for her assistance. Elizabeth looked a little annoyed with her scampering away like she did.

"Elena! Don't run off like that! That woman was trying to help you get something! What's wrong?" her mother asked.

"I don't want a dolly! I want a plane! I don't like dolls! I wanna fly a plane around!" Elena looked a little sad. Elizabeth looked from her daughter to her husband for assistance.

"Um, well, if she really wants one. Are you sure?" Jack asked his little girl. Her face brightened and nodded quickly up and down.

"Ok, which one? There's this C-22 right hereâ€¦ You could get this Ackvid right over there, which one looks the best?" Jack asked Elena.

Elena looked around at the different types of planes tied to strings, hanging mid-air in fantasy dog fights or taking off, shelves filled with parts to enhance or repair different models. She looked back at Milo's plane, who seemed to be running up and down the nearby isle filled with an assortment of clearanced out action figures.

"I want one of those! I want another one! A second one!" The six year old told him. Jack looked up to the old clerk who had a half helm of LED lights and magnifying glasses attached to the rim, his apron covered in model paint and pockets filled with paintbrushes of all shapes and sizes.

"Alright, can we get another CLX then sir?" Jack asked the clerk.

"I'm sorry sir; your son got the last one. We'll get another shipment in next week, maybe she would like one then?" The clerk said, rubbing his white beard and removing his glasses.

Elena looked heartbroken. She couldn't get the one she wanted.

"Butâ€¦ but I want that one!" She cried out, tears starting to fill her eyes.

Jack knelt beside his daughter and put an arm around her shoulders. "Aww, sweetheart, he doesn't have anymore. I'm sorry. Maybe you could get a different one? How aboutâ€¦ how about that one, right over there?" he pointed to another plane, green in color, a single prop and looking nothing like the one Milo ran around with. Elena cried and sniffled, and was pulled closer to her father's shoulder.

"I'm sorry honey, we could get another one next week if you can wait" her father cooed to her. He rubbed his left hand up and down her back to comfort his little one.

"I don't want to waitâ€¦ I just want that one!" Elena cried more into his shoulder. The clerk looked around.

"You know, I have a few models that we don't really show here out on

the floor. How about it, give a look little one?" The man, Gaven etched on his nametag, told her in an old comforting voice. Elena looked up from her father's shoulder and Elizabeth hoped she would agree. The black haired 1st grader sniffled and nodded.

"Ok then, would you like to follow me? It's not normal for us to let kids behind the counter, but since it's your birthday, I'll show ya the workshop, with your parent's permission of course" Gaven smiled and pointed towards her parents. Elena looked up to both their faces and they both nodded.

"Don't touch anything unless you ask alright?" Elizabeth told her as Jack walked her back behind the counter, Gaven opening the door. The old clerk turned on the lights and Elena was immediately awed. There were models that were not even finished lying around on different work tables, different paints that she hadn't seen or primers to place on models. There was a drying rack in the right corner, covered in primed parts and almost completed planes. A double sliding window overlooked the side of the building, away from the parking lot.

There, lying on one of the worktables was a GA-TL1 Long Sword class interceptor. It was massive, easily 2 feet long, dwarfing the CLX Milo had. Elena walked slowly up to it as Gaven noticed her eyes staring at the marvelous model.

"Ah, I see someone has a need for speed" Gaven chuckled. Elena moved her hands towards the model, but then remembered what her mother told her, and looked up to Gaven.

"It's alright, you can touch it. It isn't finished yet, no paint or primer, just sanding off extra bits and ends that don't belong" he told her with a smile. Elena turned around and ran her little fingers along the port side wing. She had up until now never seen a fighter before, or at least a modern one.

"Do you want that one?" Jack asked her, her face in pure awe. She didn't say anything, just nodded a lot.

"It's not done yet though, but it is my next project. Hmmm, that could be a predicament. I could finish it today if you want, but it'll cost a bit more than taking it home now" Gaven told Jack. Elena didn't seem to care or understand the meaning of the cost; she just knew she wanted it.

"Hmmm, well, I guess. How long would it take?" Jack asked the old man.

"Hmmm, tell you what, let's work out the price, and trust me for the little fly girl I'll make an exception. I'll even put a special emblem on it for her" Gaven clapped his hand onto Jack's shoulder and smiled.

\*\*[Two Hours later]\*\*

Elena watched the entire event, not wanting to leave the store as Gaven finished sanding odd mistakes in the molding and primed the outside of the plane so that the paint would adhere. She didn't want to leave at all, even with her mother telling her it was time to go to her birthday lunch, Jack agreed to stay behind with her while

Elizabeth took their son to get something to eat.

Elena saw Gaven pick up the interceptor and spray at different angles, making sure the paint didn't collect in droplets at different spots, putting utter care into her birthday gift. He delicately took out multiple paintbrushes and dabbed into different gunmetal colors, blacks and reds, long swaths of the colors running along the wings and fuselage.

The old clerk looked over to her and smiled, asking her to please pass a package of decals to her left on a shelf. She reached up and grabbed at the packet, pulling it down to her level, and handed it to the man. She noticed a book just below the packet, but she didn't touch it. She wanted to though, as it showed the Long Sword emblazoned on its cover.

"There. Now, to add the emblem. What should we put on it? Do you have preference?" Gaven asked Elena, and then looked up at Jack for some slight guidance. Elena didn't know. She liked it just as it was, covered black with slight shades of grey, yellow and black caution tags at different positions, the red of the inside of the engines. It looked already fantastic.

"How about a ghost? A nice friendly ghost" Jack asked her, then looked to Gaven.

"Ha! A smiling ghost on an interceptor fighter? Ah, but you are right, I bet she'd like it. How about it? A ghost on the wing?" Gaven smiled down at Elena, poking gently at her little nose.

"I'm a big girl now! I don't want a friendly ghost!" She pouted. Gaven was taken aback by the girl, and looked up at Jack.

"But you might be scared at any normal emblem he puts on there honey. What about a Cat? Or a smiley face? No?" Elena shook her head.

"Well, I could add a very detailed mean looking ghost, butâ€¦ I don't know; it could scare her" Gaven told them.

"I'm not afraid! It's my plane. It won't hurt me, right?" Elena looked up at her father.

"Yup, that's right! It's your plane, your ghost, just like you" He poked her sides and tickled her. She giggled and tried to scrunch her arms close to her body to fend off the tickle assault.

"Alright, I'll do my best work on it" Gaven said and began to paint. The emblem showed a hooded figure with scythe held in hand, an all-black face with two white eyes peering out from under the hood, armor clad below the neckline. The body seemed feminine, and on the bottom, looking as authentic as a real squadron, he wrote "Ghost, 501st" in the small ribbon wrapping around the outside of the artistic symbol. He held the fighter under a small light that seemed to dry the paint quickly for the emblem, then held it up to admire his work.

Elena was in pure bliss. Her GA-TL1 Long Sword-class interceptor was complete. Gaven slowly handed the thing down to the little girl, who could barely carry it. She loved every inch of the thing, touching it

delicately as Jack smiled down at her.

"Happy Birthday kiddo. A regular fighter ace you are now. Go get those bad guys!" Gaven chuckled to her. She slowly got the fighter out of the workshop as Jack followed, thanking Gaven for all of his work.

"It was my pleasure, trust me. I hope she has as much fun as Iâ€| wait hold on just a second" Gaven said with a wave of his hand and his index finger pointed out. He went back into his workshop and pulled out a book. On it was the Long Sword fighter's picture.

"You see, I used to be a pilot" Gaven told Elena. Her little eyes widened in surprise. He opened the book up and inside, on every page, were the part blueprints of the stealth fighter and maintenance procedures.

"Sometimes, we pilots would have to do some of our own maintenance if there weren't enough technicians, so I have a few of these lying around. You had to know just what your craft did, how it acted, how it flew. A good pilot was one with his, or her, craft" Gaven smiled and tousled her hair.

"Exactly, though these days the maintenance and supply is done separate from the pilots. We don't really have to worry about that" Jack told Gaven, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Ah, so you fly as well? Apparently it runs in the family I see" Gaven laughed and saw Elena lose interest in the two men, already having the book open with her plane next to her and reading with deep focus on the ground.

"I fly a Pelican transport though, dropping supplies off to different colonies or personnel, though it seems to have gotten pretty risky doing it now with the warâ€|" Jack pushed his brown hair back from his forehead, only to have it bounce back to where it was.

"Sadly, it doesn't look like it's going very well. I myself retired before it even started. Have you had any run ins yet with those blasted aliens?" Gaven asked with a serious face.

"No, but then I run shipment routes between the inner colonies on board UNSC cruisers, so there's usually enough protection to not worry. Still, I keep my guard up. I only hope this war doesn't continue on for much longer. I don't want my children to grow up in a life fearful of those beasts coming for them" Jack told him, watching his daughter poke at the flaps and stabilizers of the aircraft she held, reading the intricacies of the equipment it had.

"I know how you feel. My son was a pilot for the 501st, was all but destroyed at the battle of Capricornia. He'sâ€| with his mother now... rest in peace Jacob..." Gaven looked saddened by the words that exited his mouth.

"I hope the kids don't ever have to fight this war. It better be over soon, those soldiers, what are they called, those Spartans, better finish this quick" Jack solemnly said.

Just then, the doorbell jingled and a man in a suit walked in, a five o'clock shadow on his jaw and what seemed to be a white band of hair

forming near his ears. He looked around and noticed the little girl on the ground reading out the big words, then pointing to different parts of the fighter as if she now recognized what each piece did. She didn't quite know how the fighter stayed in the air yet, that would require more education that she had yet to gain, but she did know what each part seemed to do for the aircraft.

"Well, someone is a learned child. How old is she?" The man asked Jack in a british accent.

"She just turned six today. That reminds me, I got to get her up to go get her birthday lunch, my wife and son are probably waiting for us" Jack said and walked over and tried to pick up Elena, who at first resisted but then remembered there would be cake.

"Hmmm, for a six year old, she seems years beyond herself. So you like planes little one?" The man asked her, now kneeling as she got up and looked at him. She nodded and smiled.

"My daddy's a pilot! I wanna grow up and be one too!" she said excitedly, picking up her fighter.

"Hmmm, you know it takes a lot of skill to be a fighter pilot, you sure you want to be one? What does your father fly?" The man asked.

"I apologize, I didn't mean to keep you both, but it's intriguing. My name is Doctor Daveth Wright" The man offered his hand to Jack.

"Jack Gripen, and no worries. I fly a Pelican transport, though it seems she wants now to be a fighter pilot more than anything. You're a doctor? What field?" Jack asked.

"Psychology and Brain Sciences" Daveth told him smiling.

"Wow, my wife tried to become a psychologist, but she never finished the courses. Wellâ€|" Jack trailed off then looked down at his daughter.

"Ready to go Elena? Cake?" Jack asked. Elena nodded quickly and he smiled.

"I'll be the best pilot out there! After daddy of course!" Elena told Daveth.

"I can see you will! Have a good rest of your Birthday Elena!" Dr. Wright waved goodbye to her as she did the same, her father holding the book in his left hand while holding her left hand in his right soon after. She hugged the Long Sword to her chest, barely keeping its tail from grating against the ground.

"It's not every day you see a child already knowing what they want to do at that age, let alone being as quick to learn as she is; I can see her going into the Academy already" Gaven sighed out. Dr. Wright nodded in agreement, still staring at the little girl walking to their car and getting in.

"That little one is going to impress when she grows up, I just know it" The doctor said, then turned around and walked down towards the



train sets.

"If we all live long enough to see her do itâ€|" Wright whispered to himself.

\*\*[1 hour later]\*\*

Milo was asleep with his turboprop plane resting on his chest in the car while Elena looked out at the sky, cake bits around her mouth. She fantasized about flying through the air, holding her plane up to the window, though it was still at an angle due to the car seat in front of her. She didn't care, she could see the fighter in her mind, diving and weaving, rolling through the clouds, free. When they finally came to a stop in the driveway of their home on the steep hills of San Francisco, she waited for out and watched as her Mother pulled up behind them.

Milo slowly woke up as her father picked him out of the car, bringing him up to the front door and opening it. Elena quickly followed, the fighter manual in one hand and the jet in the other.

Milo was gently brought up to his room and placed on his bed, the CLX still in his hand, as Jack crept out of the room and closed the door, Elizabeth looked at him with a stern look.

"What?" he asked, bewildered by her look.

"Don't what me. I don't like how you're getting your daughter into all of this, it isn't right for a girl at her age to be into these things" Elizabeth whispered to him.

"I didn't start it; she snuck over and asked for it. If she's interested in it, why are you being angry? She enjoys jets and planes! Let her be!" Jack gestured with his hands down over the hallway rails, beyond the stairs and into the living room where Elena still wasn't tuckered out, reading her manual.

"It's just not normal for a girl to be into those. She should be playing with dolls or makeup or something, not wondering how to fire a missile from a jet" his wife growled.

"Would you have preferred I got her a starship model and she wonder how to fire the MAC gun?" he asked jokingly. Elizabeth did not look pleased.

"It's fine, it's a natural thing, and it's not uncommon for girls to sometimes be a bit tomboyish, even at her age. She wants to keep up with the big kids, and the big kids like these things. She could grow out of it, or-" Jack's data pad vibrated. He pulled it from his pocket and read the contents.

"Don't tell me" Elizabeth got annoyed.

"I have to go, I'm sorry" Jack apologized to his wife as she crossed her arms over her chest and huffed, looking away from him. He tried to hug her and give her a kiss, but she would have nothing of it.

"It's her birthday! Can't you tell them you have a family emergency or something? You know she can't get enough of you when you're here

and that's hardly ever!" she looked at him worried.

"It helps pay the bills honey. I have to. I'm sorry, duty calls. I'll be backâ€¦ well, later" he told her and leaned in to kiss her, getting a small one in return.

"How much later? You say that each time, and it could be a week, a month, how much later?" she asked, still annoyed.

"Shouldn't be too long, it's a quick trip up to a frigate and then down again, I should be home by tomorrow night, probably" Jack told her.

"Go on, tell your daughter you have to leave" she huffed and made a waving gesture down to the living room. Jack walked down the curved stairs and walked into the living room. Elena was sitting cross legged on the couch, already a quarter of the way through the book. He was surprised, though not by much, as she always was a fast reader. Her teachers praised her for being ahead of her class.

Elena looked up at her father. "Hey munchkin, daddy has to go for a bit-" he couldn't even finish his sentence before she started whining.

"But daddy! I don't want you to go!" She whimpered.

"It'll just be tonight and tomorrow, I promise. I'll be back tomorrow night, ok?" He said, nudging her chin up with his right hand.

"You always promise. You broke your last promise. You said you'd be home early last time too, and you were gone for a long time." Elena's lower lip pouted up and trembled.

"This time I'll keep my promise, I won't break it, so you stay strong ok? It's only a day, no worries right? Hey, when you get older, maybe I'll take you with me one of these times up in my Pelican, would you like that? Huh? I'm pretty sure I can get my superiors to accept that, all I got to get is a pass for you and then boom! Flying through the air! How about it?" Jack gestured through the air with his hand, cutting a flat palm with his fingers pushing through the air, coasting like a plane.

"Really? You mean it?" She asked.

"Yup when you're older, so just keep your chin up and keep doing good in school, and I swear I'll do it" Jack chuckled and poked her in the nose.

"Pinkie swear! I want a Pinkie swear!" Elena said, putting her hand out and sticking her pinkie finger for him to wrap his own around.

"Absolutely not! You can't Jack! She'll be too young even then! How long do you expect to keep this promise?" Elizabeth asked, figuring he was just going to hurt his daughter's feelings when the promise was broken later.

"Well, as I said, when she's older. Can you be patient until you're older?" Jack asked Elena. She sat there thinking for a bit.

"Can I get more toys before then? How long do I have to wait?" She asked.

"Yes you can get more toys until then, more planes and jets! That shouldn't be a problem. You just have to wait a few years alright? They go by quick enough don't they?" Elena's father ruffled her hair, the long strands wiggling behind her neck and down her back.

"Yeah, I guessâ€¦" She said after a few seconds.

Jack put his pinkie out and she quickly took it up with her pinkie, shaking both hands in unison.

"There, pinkie swear. Now I got to go, but remember, I'll be back tomorrow night ok?" Jack told her grinning from ear to ear.

"Ok, I love you daddy!" Elena said and shot her arms out for a hug.

"I love you too sweetheart, my little fly girl" Jack hugged his daughter gently, then got up and left through the front door. Elena sat on the couch for a minute watching the door close, then went back to staring at her book.

\*\*[8 hours later, 2000 hours (Military Calendar)]\*\*

Elena didn't take her nap in the afternoon, though she wasn't cranky as she stared out of her window from her bed. On the large sit in window sill, laid her new fighter, aiming its nose out towards the sky, as if ready to take off. She was going to remember what her father promised her, no, pinkie swore to her that day. She was going to get to fly with him in his pelican, and hopefully in the future become a pilot herself.

She crawled back into her bed, pushing her sheets aside and pulling them back over her, her bedroom lights already out, the little kittens and puppies painted on the walls being of little acknowledgement compared to her love for the one two foot long jet near her window.

"Sweetheart? Time to go to sleep. Do you want your nightlight on?" Her mother peeked around the door and looked at her.

"Yes please mommy" Elena said.

Elizabeth walked into the room and flipped the switch on the small rotating carousel on her dresser. As soon as it turned on, Elizabeth wrinkled her face up a bit.

"Oh Jackâ€¦" she said more to herself than to her daughter, as rotating inside were little planes.

"I guess he plugged the wrong one in, I wonder if Milo has yours, not that he uses it anymore. I'll go grab it" Elizabeth said and turned towards the door.

"No! I want this one!" Elena yelled out.

"You do? Are you sure? You don't want the balloons and monkeys?" Her mother asked. She nodded up and down. She was hooked.

"Alright, sleep tight" Elizabeth leaned in and kissed her daughter on her forehead, running her hand along her cheek.

"Don't let the bed bugs bite" Elena continued.

"Cause if they do, take a shoe, and beat them up until their black and blue!" They both said in unison, giggling.

"Alright, go to sleep, see you in the morning." Elizabeth walked out of the room and slowly closed the door until a crack was all that was left.

The six year old drifted off to sleep, dreaming of diving through the clouds, then up into space, little aliens greeting her along the way with smiles and birds soaring alongside her.

(Author's note: I wanted to start with as much back story as I could with this as possible, hopefully nobody gets bored as I really would like to flesh the people out as much as possible, although no flames please if I accidentally get someone being one or two dimensional! I really am trying! Please review and let me know what you all think! And yes I know Elena's last name is a SAAB JAS 39 Gripen. It kind of fits, though 500 years in the future it'd probably be lost to history.)

## 2. Adventure Like No Other Pt1

\*\*[1400 hours, June 11\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\*, 2542, San Francisco Presidio Middle School]\*\*

Elena bolted for the door the instant the bell rang. School was out for the year, and she was finally going to make her father live up to his promise so many years ago. The promise had changed bit by bit, eventually adding she needed to get good grades in school, then she had to get at least 3 As (in which she was always a straight A student, it wasn't exactly hard for her,) and then finally she had to finish all of her chores at home before she could be picked up.

She ran to her bike rack and pulled her keys for her lock. She scrambled with the keys to push them into the opening that would free her bike from the U shaped metal it was attached to, and heard the Click! of the lock no longer being an annoyance.

She jumped on and was about to leave when a hand grabbed one of her handle bars.

"Whoa there! Hang on just a minute Elena, you weren't going to leave without saying goodbye or something?" a male voice said that was attached to the hand. Elena looked up and saw Andy, a classmate of hers that was the same grade as her, 8th.

"Oh hey, I, uh, sorry, I was just in a rush to get home. I guess I forgot" She blushed and pushed her long black hair behind her left ear. Andy was fairly good looking, dirty blonde hair combed so that it barely reached his left eye, and an earring in his left ear. He was somewhat tall for his age, already a few inches beyond her, though puberty was stilling rushing to complete itself for both of them. His eyes were a gentle green.

"It's ok. Hey, we were going to have a graduation party at my house, and, I uh, was wondering if you could come. It's not a big party, but it would be really great if you could" Andy smiled, blushing slightly and looked away, playing with a piece of tape that was wrapped around the bike holder's top bar.

"I-" Elena started, but she wasn't even going to finish the graduation ceremony, as her father would be doing his transport trips starting that day and she desperately wanted to go. If she stayed, the promise would be broken.

"I'm sorry, but, well" Elena tried to find the words to tell Andy. She was tempted. She liked Andy for the past year, and he didn't seem to care about any other girls, always finding time to hang out with her. He was, however, afraid of her mother, who did not want her dating until she was older. Her father seemed to think Andy was a good kid, and treated Elena pretty well, helping her in projects, being her partner in classes, and sneaking out during the night to go see movies.

"I-It's okay, you don't have to go if you don't want to, I just thought, you know, you'd like to hang out with meâ€¦ I mean with us! Everyone at the party that is!" Andy quickly corrected himself, slightly stuttering. She thought he looked cute when he did that.

"No, it's not that I don't want to, it's just, well, a long time ago my dad made a promise to me to take me flying with him, and well, I finally got the chance and he's going to do it for the summer, I'll get to hang out with him the whole time" Elena told him.

"Oh yeah, you told me your dad was a pilot! How cool is that right? So you get to go with him on his Pelican? I wish I had such an awesome summer waiting. I have to do chores around the house. I'm thinking of getting a small job cutting people's grass or something" He said as they both walked down the street, Elena wheeling her bike next to her.

"Yeah, don't think you'll get far with that. How many people do you know have a lawn in San Francisco?" She asked, giggling.

"You have a very good point there, sadly. Hmm, I could always try and tutor like you do. I mean, well, try to do it like you do" He shuffled along with his hands in his pockets, his backpack jumbling a bit as he moved. He glanced towards her and smiled slightly, and Elena blushed.

"I'm not that goodâ€¦ maybe you could get Amber to help, like a double team tutoring or something." Elena told him as she mentioned her friend's name. Amber was a close friend to Elena for the past four years, being much taller than Elena and hit puberty early. Elena thought she was much prettier than herself, though she was never allowed to wear makeup because of her mother.

"Are you kidding me? You saved my bacon with those last two projects. If you weren't thereâ€¦ I don't know what I would have done. Was a little difficult getting ahold of you though, what with your mother glaring at me all the time and you doing that wholeâ€¦ well, that thing you do, you disappearing into thin air and reappearing

somewhere else" Andy chuckled. Elena was really good at silently appearing out of thin air, a natural stealth she didn't mean to pull on anyone. She just felt fine being unnoticed.

"What? It isn't that hard to reach me! You could have called! I mean, well, it would be nice if you callâ€¦" She looked away awkwardly and pushed her hair away from her eyes. Her face had no blemishes of any kind, her skin showing no acne of any kind with part of her Argentinian heritage showing in the color of her skin. Despite her already hitting puberty and budding, she didn't really get any oily skin. What she worried about was her training bra and having to remember to either wear feminine hygiene or deodorant. She didn't sweat much, but she still was self-conscious of the way she smelled, and always kept a small watered down body spray.

"I'll try more, justâ€¦ well-"he tried to explain but was cut off.

"There you are! You shot off so fast I thought you had a rocket attached!" a blonde haired girl raced up the streets towards them both.

"Oh! Amber! I was going to call you later, once I got my chores done" Elena said, stopping to allow her friend to catch up.

"Oh, don't you dare! I know all about your little trip going with your dad in his plane-" Amber was cut off.

"VTOL, it's a VTOL. A plane would be considered having a fixed wing span of some form providing an area of lift that gets pushed up by air flow around it, A VTOL has the lift provided by-" Amber put her hand over her friend's mouth.

"There you go spouting all that technical crap again. You really are head over heels for aircraft aren't you?" Amber asked gawking at her.

"I've always liked them, don't know why. Is that weird?" Elena asked; a bit embarrassed both of them were staring at her.

"Well, I mean, you should be into makeup and boys and movies and junk food! Talking on the phone, not wanting to fly a plane YES I KNOW IT'S A VTOL!" Amber barked at the last part knowing she'd be corrected. Andy fidgeted a bit and felt as if he was entering girl talk land, something he felt awkward with. Suddenly Amber looked at Andy and grabbed her friend by her shoulders.

"Hey! See this one? You need to grab her before someone else does Andy! Because knowing how odd she acts someone will do mean things to her or she'll do some sort of plane stuff with some company and be a millionaire, so you'll have a sugar momma watching out for you!" Amber told him. Elena's eyes bugged at what her friend just said, and Andy seemed uncomfortable.

"Well, uh, I guess, I'll see you when you come back from summer break, right? I mean, we'll be going to the same high school so you can tell me all about your awesome flight time! Take pictures ok? I hope you have a great trip! Come back safe and sound!" Andy asked her, pleading with his green eyes for her to say yes.

"Wha, err, ok! I guess I'll take pictures! I'll see you later then! Um, bye!" Elena waved to Andy as he backed up a bit, giving her a bashful goofy smile, and turned around as she brought her hand she just waved to him with to cross over her heart.

"Again, you are more interested in jets than that hunk?" Amber looked back and forth between the slowly disappearing figure of Andy and her friend.

"What? So, well, I like him but, well, my mother gets in the way, and I've liked aircraft since I was little. Call me weird or whatever, but I know what I like. I justâ€¦ I don't know... does he like me?" Elena asked.

"Are you that oblivious? Yes! He worships the ground you walk on! I can tell, trust me, I have a nose for these things" Amber said as they continued walking down the street and around the corner. Elena noticed a black car that was unmarked with any license plate parked nearby. It seemed to be moving every time they went around a corner of a block and was following. Elena shook her head. She could be just imagining it.

The girls reached Elena's home and parted ways, giving each other a hug and wishing each other well during their summer vacation.

"I'm going to the beach, get a sun tan. I hope it makes me look sexy" Amber posed a tiny bit.

"Sexy? Um, Amber, don't you think you're a little young to be thinking that way? I mean, wellâ€¦. never mind, I shouldn't be talking" Elena cut her losses. Once Amber started thinking up a plan of action, you couldn't get her out of it. Amber continued on towards her house and Elena walked up the steps to her home. She unlocked the door and slipped in quickly to run upstairs, only to get caught by the all-powerful voice that was her mother in the kitchen.

"How was your last day of middle school?" Elizabeth yelled from around two corners. Elena was stonewalled on the third step. It always surprised Elena how well her mother heard things around the house or could sense her kids nearby.

"Good, I'll get started right away on the chores mom!" Elena tried to dodge out of talking to her mother quickly and took another few steps.

"You're quick to do them, are you that excited for your father coming over to pick you up? He won't show up until tomorrow morning you know" Elizabeth walked out of the kitchen wiping her hands off with a cloth wipe.

"I know, butâ€¦ well, I just want to make sure everything is ready, that's all" Elena told her mother.

"Look, come sit down for a minute with me" Elizabeth told her daughter, and she grudgingly stepped down from the stairs and sat down on the couch.

"I thought this whole obsession with aircraft was just a phase and you'd grow out of it or something, but it really means a lot to you doesn't it?" Elizabeth asked her.

"Of course! I mean, well, ever since I can remember, I've always liked dad picking me up and him flying me around the rooms, andâ€¦ I just like how planes look you know? Some of them sleek, others not so much, but the way they work. It's interesting. Does it really bother you that much that I like them over, say, horses orâ€¦ or dolls?" Elena whispered the last bit to her mother, wincing a bit and cocking an eyebrow.

"No, well, it just doesn't seem like a normal thing, but if you enjoy it, then I'm fine with it. I just don't want you to get your hopes up. I meanâ€¦ well, I don't know what I mean. I just want you to be happy alright? I just don't want you doing this just for your father, cause, well, of his profession."

Elena was taken aback by the comment.

"What do you mean because of dad? He didn't make me like planes mom. Remember when I was six and you both tried to talk me into getting a doll instead of a model airplane? I still wanted it. You think I'm doing thisâ€¦ you think I'm doing this for him? No! I like them mom. I want to fly when I get older. I don'tâ€¦ I don't want to be stuck on the ground" Elena told her mother.

"Stuck on the ground? Do you feel stuck here?" Elizabeth looked at her daughter, bewildered.

"No, just, well, I don't know. Remember that time we went to Terrywood theme park? Remember that ride we went on? The Afterburner?" Elena asked.

"Yeah, you absolutely loved it, then said you wanted to go home after the next ride, the twister or some such thing when you lost feeling in your-" Elizabeth was cut off.

"Back to the Afterburner; when we were held up by the seats and it launched, it felt just as good as flying. That feeling, I love it. It was fast and the rolls and turns it did, I imagine that's what flying a jet is like. I want to see it; I want to feel that again, on my terms, not some paid amusement ride. I want to control the rolls and turns" Elena finished telling her mother.

Elizabeth sat for a moment thinking then nodded knowingly, understanding what her daughter was telling her.

"You are growing up way too fast young lady. Where is all of this maturity coming from?" She smiled and caressed Elena's cheek.

"Mooooommmmmâ€¦ I'm not a kid anymore. I'm looking forward. You always said I have to do that and get my head focused. I'm focused. I've been getting straight As the past three years, and I'm an honors student. If I can continue on this track through high school then maybe, with dad's help, I could join the academy and-" Elena saw her mother's face sink. She felt she hit the wrong mom button.

"Elena you aren't thinking about joining the UNSC again, are you? Look I thought we talked about this" She shook her head slightly.



"No, YOU don't want me to join, dad's ok with it! I'm not going to be some commercial pilot transporting passengers to and from continents on Earth! Thank you for flying Airlines of the Stupid! Next time you want to shoot through the air at a snail's speed in a cramped little cabin, just call me!" Elena stood up and mimed some stewardess talking.

"Now listen! I don't want you getting hurt, and the way the war is going on, if you joined the UNSC you would definitely be sent out to fight! Now do you want that? I couldn't stand it if that happened!" Elizabeth stood up as well as Elena turned around the couch and headed up the stairs.

"Not listening to this again mom! I'm going to go get started on the chores!" Elena said, quickly shooting up the steps. Elizabeth sighed and shook her head, looking out the window.

Elena opened her door and deftly dodged a floating model hanging from a string from her ceiling. Ever since her sixth birthday, she'd collected a sizeable cache of model planes, jets, helicopters and even some starships.

She dropped her backpack near the foot of her bed and pulled up the sides of her trash can to grab the bag and take it out of her room. Her walls were covered in blueprint designs of Pelicans and Long Swords, Sky Hawks and Bumblebee pods. Her most cherished model was still sitting on the windowsill, still looking like it would take off if the window was opened. The paint was slightly faded, the black starting to look like it was turning grey from the exposure to the sunlight, but she still loved it. She memorized every page of the manual for the GA-TL1 and modified form of the GA-TL2, and could recite by heart different passages for the fuselage evacuation, afterburner zone points, as well as numerous other obscure fields involving the fighters and transports.

She had even gained some special gifts from unknown sources, true unknown sources that she knew weren't her father or friends sending to her. These were found on her doorstep in small packages labeled to her, and when she opened them, she found assorted books of different fighter craft she didn't know existed beyond the Long Sword. One package had an advanced Personal Terminal, and it was portable. When her mother found out, she was a little worried someone was stalking her daughter. Nothing happened afterwards, and she soon found out the terminal had cost a fortune, being of military specifications.

Elena looked up and noticed one of the spots on her dresser was missing a model, and she looked around the sides to see if it had fallen off. There was nothing on the ground, so she started searching carefully, and then thought of just who would take it. Then she realized there were only two people who lived in the house, and one was not interested in aircraft.

Elena stormed over to her brother's room, and banged on the door. Music was blaring out from the cracks and seams, and she continued her relentless beating of the painted wood in front of her. Finally, the door opened.

"What do you want?" Milo looked down at her, a few inches taller. He'd gotten a little heavier over the years as he grew up, and shaved his hair very close to the scalp, with a black swoop gelled up near

his forehead. He was wearing what looked to be Goth clothing, with the name of some band she didn't really know nor care about. He was a sophomore in Redwood High School.

"I know you took it. I want it back" Elena growled at him and shoved her hand out, palm up.

"Me? Take something of yours? Why ever would I do that? Perish the thought I'd ever care about anything you own" Milo sarcastically remarked.

"You took it! I know it was you! Mom would never touch my models, not even to dust them! I want it back now! Give me it!" She yelled at him.

"Which model?" He scoffed.

"You know. The D77-TC Pelican! I want it now!" She looked righteously pissed.

"Fine, I was just showing a friend it to show him what dad does, big whoop" He explained and reached behind him and picked something up. Milo pulled his arm back and dropped the model pelican into her hands along with a small piece of plastic.

"Oh my god! You broke it!" She screamed, looking down at one of the wings that were missing, the piece of plastic the part that seemed to have been cracked off.

"I didn't break it! Maybe if you used better glue it wouldn't just fall off! Or maybe it's supposed to come off like that" Milo said, quite bored with his sister already.

"Damn it! Don't you ever touch my things again!" She screamed right into his face and stormed off, he looking slightly dumbfounded, but largely uncaring, and then closed the door again. Elizabeth heard the commotion and walked up the stairs. She turned the corner just as Elena's door slammed shut.

Elena's mother sighed for a second and knocked on the door, hearing sobs coming from the other side.

"Elena? Is everything alright? Can I come in?" She asked. No response, simply more crying.

Elizabeth opened the door and slowly entered, seeing Elena sitting at her desk with a pack of glue nearby.

"What's wrong?" Elizabeth asked and put her arm around her daughter's shoulders.

"Milo broke my pelican" Elena cried, tears streaming down her cheeks as she tried to re-glue the wing back on the little aircraft.

"Oh. Well, you can fix it right? It isn't that bad, look it's not really that damaged." Elizabeth looked over the small model and noticed the left wing was lying on the desk.

"You don't understandâ€¦ this is the model dad flies. He gave me it" Elena managed to say in between sniffles.

"Well here, let's put some glue right here, and then attach this right hereâ€¦ see? It's fine" Elizabeth tried to help, but the wing fell off again.

"The glue doesn't work! Something to do with the paint it has! There's no vertical bond from the adhesive!" She cried to her mother.

"Oh honeyâ€¦ maybe we could get another one? I mean, did you make this one or did he buy it built? Maybe you're father has something stronger he could use to get it repaired."

"Noâ€¦ I don't want another one. This is the one he gave meâ€¦ I'm attached to it. Hopefully he has something that can bind it together or some such" Elena sniffled again, wiping her eyes clear.

"Well, you can ask him tomorrow then. You don't have to take the trash out if you don't want to, I'll do it. Just sit here for a little bit and calm down, ok? Everything will be ok" Elizabeth rubbed circles along her daughter's back, trying to sooth her. She then patted her gently on the shoulder and left.

\*\*[1700 hours]\*\*

Elena came down to help with making dinner, meanwhile Milo still sat up in his room until he was called. Thirty minutes later, he finally came down, looking starved. The family sat down and ate quietly.

"So how was your final day of being a sophomore at school Milo?" His mother asked.

"Fine" Milo nonchalantly said.

"Just fine? You didn't hang out with any friends after school or something?" Elizabeth asked.

"It was fine" Milo seemed to get annoyed.

"I was just asking a question, no need to get uppity with me young man" Elizabeth leveled a gaze on him that made him quickly rethink his actions.

"Sorry" he said before finishing his food.

Elena sat in silence, picking at her casserole and chewing on her string beans.

"Did you see Amber today Elena?" her mother asked.

"Yeah" Elena said, now finding the interrogation was aimed at her.

"Is she doing well? You two haven't had much time to hang out these past few weeks, was beginning to wonder if you two were still friends" Elizabeth said as she took a mouthful of her casserole.

"We're still best friends, just haven't had much time" Elena softly responded.

"Cuz of your retarded obsession, friends aren't that high on your priority list" Milo growled out.

"Hey!" Elena was about to start cursing at him when Elizabeth cleared her throat.

"Excuse me! This is the dinner table! No fighting! Both of you! Milo apologize!" Elizabeth ordered her son.

"Why? Everybody knows it's true! "Your little sister is so weird, always playing with her models." You know Jeremy was actually interested in you until he found out your little fetish?" Milo goaded his sister.

"That's enough! Milo! Up to your room! Now!" Elizabeth barked.

"Gladly" Milo stood up and walked up to his room. Elena sat there, still picking at her food.

"He didn't mean it honey. It's notâ€¦ It's not some fetish like he said" Elizabeth tried to fix what her son just blurted out.

"You don't have to say anything mom. It's ok" Elena picked up her plate and walked into the kitchen from the dining room, clearing what little was left from her plate into the trash and placing the plate in the dish washer. She grabbed the recycling from the second bin and started walking towards the door.

"You don't have to do that sweetheart, I can do it if you want" Elena's mother offered.

"No, I'll do it, I have to finish the chores or dad might go back on his promiseâ€¦ like he always does" Elena almost whispered. Elizabeth didn't have anything to say for a moment as her daughter opened the back door and walked outside.

Elena walked to the recycling dumpster and threw the bag in, hearing the clang of cans and some bottles rolling. She looked up and towards the sky and saw that it was starting to get dark. Stars were appearing and the moon started to show.

She looked around and noticed the same black car was nearby, parked across from her house. She looked at it curiously, wondering why it was there. None of her neighbors owned it, and it had no license plate. Why would anyone not have the license plate? Just then the car started up and slowly crept down the street towards her. She backed up and went towards the house, but the car slid by and continued on down the street. She sighed in relief and entered her home to complete the rest of her chores.

As soon as she finished her chores, Elena walked by her mother who was reading a magazine while the TV was on. It baffled her that her mother could leave the TV on and swap her attention over to a page in a magazine. She walked up the stairs and into her room, now requiring her lights to be turned on. As soon as she did so, the room came alive, as spotlights were positioned all over, aimed at the model crafts that were hanging or positioned on shelves.

She lied down on her bed and stared up at the ceiling, covered in assorted aircraft, some dogfighting, others transporting an odd item or two. Over her bed side wall was the poster of a Long sword swooping in for a kill, its guns blazing and two missiles firing at something outside the boundaries the poster could contain.

She rolled over and grabbed her pillow, holding onto it. She couldn't wait till tomorrow, as all everybody wanted to tell her today was that she was weird.

\*\*[0800 hours, June 12\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\*, 2542, San Francisco, Marin County]\*\*

Elena was slowly bringing herself awake and eating her breakfast, her shower already taken and clothes packed. She was worried. Her father should have already gotten to her house, but he hadn't even pulled in the drive way from what she saw.

"He'll be here honey, I doubt he'd forget after you reminded him every day over the phone for the past four weeks straight" Elizabeth said as she dug into an overhead cabinet for a sealed tub of coffee. Elena finished her cereal and placed it in the dish washer just as the doorbell rang. She jumped up and was at the door before her mother could figure out what had happened.

Elena opened the door and saw her father standing there, smiling.

"Ready to go fly girl?" Jack asked her.

"Daddy!" She jumped into his arms and gave him a hug.

"You're getting big! Did you do you're chores like I said?" he asked her.

"Of course! I've been waiting for this for a long time!" Elena said with a goofy 'you know me' look on her face.

"Good to hearâ€| hey Elizabeth" Jack said softly as he looked past his daughterâ€| towards his ex-wife.

"Hello" Elizabeth responded.

"You look good, you lookâ€| goodâ€| I already said thatâ€| um, well, ready?" he turned his attention back to his daughter who already picked up her bags.

"Make sure she stays safe you hear me? No crazy stuff happening! I don't want to be called in the middle of the night telling me my daughter was in a flying accident alright?" Elizabeth said as Jack picked up a suitcase packed with Elena's clothes.

"She'll be fine Liz, nothing will happen to her. You know me" Jack groaned.

"All too well. Again, she stays safe alright?" Elizabeth glared at him after he used a shortened version of her name.

He waved back at her, throwing the suitcase into the back of his pickup. Elena was already in the passenger seat. Jack opened the

driver's side door and jumped in, buckling his belt right after. Elena waved goodbye to her mother through the window, and Elizabeth smiled and blew her a kiss then waved as well.

"All set? Good. Now, you'll need this to get through the gates when the guards ask for it, it's the pass you'll need to verify your name, personal information, etc." Jack handed his daughter a credit card sized object with her picture on the front, along with some information, her blood type, medical conditions which she had none, height and weight.

"Now you need to stay with me at all times, you cannot go wandering any buildings or hallways at the base" her father told her sternly.

"What about if we board a ship? Can I see a few things there?" Elena asked.

"Well, we'll get to that when we get there" Jack told her. She crossed her arms over her chest and pouted.

"Hey, you said you wanted to come along for the ride this time, so I'm taking you with me for the rides. Don't worry, it'll be fun, trust me" Jack winked at his daughter and started his truck. He pulled out of the driveway and headed out of San Francisco, and south towards Vandenberg Air Force Base.

\*\*[1200 hours, June 12\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2542, Highway 101, California]\*\*

Elena was giddy; she couldn't keep still in her seat. She reviewed everything she could about the model of pelican her father flew during the long drive.

"How you hanging over there hon?" Jack asked his little girl.

"Hmm? Oh, just thinking" Elena nonchalantly said.

"About what?" her father pushed for a bit more info.

"Nothing. Hey, what fuel type is your D77-TC? Is it an ICE Transfer or JP-42 with Triethylborane Tetrisyl? You never told me which upgrades you got" She asked him. Jack looked over at his daughter, surprised and impressed.

"I'm telling you, you'd scare the living hell out of any instructor if you joined the academy. It's ICE Transfer by the way" Jack laughed.

"So still the same old? You'd think with the improvements in fuel efficiency from the Covenant tech we have they'd install the newer pulse Ion generators for-" Elena looked sheepish as she realized she was rambling.

"Heh, no they didn't. The wing of birds I fly in don't get any of the special treatment; we're just transports. Who knows? Maybe you'll get a chance to fly something with those installed one day" Jack smiled as he watched the road.

"I hope" Elena whispered as she watched out the window, seeing the

view change as suddenly the road they were on became far smoother and better taken care of. The Infrastructure for the area was obviously not the same as the past fifty miles, and Elena had learned areas controlled by military bases were maintained well enough so that convoys wouldn't have any trouble with reaching the facility.

Jack turned the truck onto another road that seemed to be a back way towards somewhere.

"Is this the way into Vandenberg?" Elena asked.

"Yup, to the front gates. Do you know the history behind the AFB?" Jack asked her.

"Vandenberg AFB was named after General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, and was originally named Camp Cooke. It was renamed to Vandenberg AFB on October 4th, 1958. It was opened in 1941, though it wasn't fully completed yet. During the 21st century, it was a missile testing facility and launch platform for a wide assortment of ICBMs and was selected as the west coast launch site for the original space shuttle program, but was never used until the mid-22nd century when other space programs expanded and gained more funding. Mmmm, lemme thinkâ€¦" Elena was quiet for a minute, trying to remember more details.

"That's plenty, didn't think you read that pamphlet I gave you. I underestimated you sweetheart. It wasn't about any aircraft after all" Jack noted.

"Aerospace means the atmosphere of Earth and surrounding space. It was later expanded to identify the transition between surrounding planets in a solar system and the atmospheres that celestial bodies may contain. If I don't read up on the places that allow transport outside of Earth's atmosphere, then I feel I'd beâ€¦ gimping myself on the knowledge needed for piloting. Plusâ€¦ it's where you work dad" Elena looked up at her father.

Jack smiled and elbowed her gently in the side while still driving. Elena giggled.

After five minutes of driving Jack stopped the truck and sat there.

"Is something wrong?" Elena asked.

"You probably don't know this, but most military bases will shoot you on site if you enter within a specific range of the facility and are not supposed to be there. I am supposed to be there, but you are an unknown. All bases inside the U.S. have a surrounding empty land, commonly referred to as 'no man's land.' If we cross into it, we'd be asking for the base to open up on us" Jack was very serious at the moment he was explaining the consequences.

"Soâ€¦ what do we do?" Elena asked, worried.

"Hold on just a sec" Jack told her, and opened up the glove compartment. Inside was an ear bone microphone. He gently placed it into his ear and turned a slight knob on the top of it, barely noticeable by the naked eye.

"This is Echo 2-1-2 pilot Flight Lieutenant Jack Gripen calling Vandenberg AFB, how copy?" Jack said to no one.

"Vandenberg AFB GuardTAC control to Lieutenant Jack Gripen, good copy. What's your request?" Chatter opened up inside the mic, slipping towards Jack's ear drum, something Elena couldn't hear.

"Requesting no fire on red pickup heading down east path road, heading towards front gate, one civilian in passenger seat, she has a pass. Response?" Jack told GuardTAC.

There was a long pause. "You say you have a civilian as a passenger? How copy?" GuardTAC responded back.

"Good copy. That is correct, she is allowed alongside me. Is there no fire?" Jack asked. Another long pause.

"No fire response on red pickup, we have acknowledgement, no bulls eye. Head on in Jack" GuardTAC responded.

"Alright, that's a go ahead, we can head in now without any problems" Jack told his daughter. He started up the red pickup and drove further down the road, coming into view of the military base. The area was massive, 86,000 square acres and she couldn't even see a tenth of it. Elena noticed in the distance there were multiple automated turrets on the walls near the guard posts up ahead, all aimed at them. Multiple bunker nests could be seen in the distance, probably aimed at them as well. Two Scorpions were sitting to the side of the main entrance gate, and Jack slowed and stopped at the guard post.

The guard walked up as Jack rolled his window down, and asked for I.D.

"I'm Flight Lieutenant Jack Gripen, you guys should be expecting me; did GuardTAC radio down?" Jack asked the guardsmen.

"Not your I.D. sir; hers. You said you had a civilian with you, she's not expected" the guardmen, Jefferson was on his breast armor, told him.

"Show him your pass" Jack said to Elena, and she pulled out the small card and handed it to the guard. He pulled out a scanner and waved it over the little piece of plastic and aluminum before getting a response on the scanner.

"Alright, you're clear, head on in" Jefferson told them and walked back into his bunker, pressing a nearby button and the massive gate doors opened up slowly. Jack started up the truck again and watched as all barriers were taken out of the way for him. He pulled through the gate and drove slowly past multiple buildings of different shapes and sizes, almost all a matte grey concrete color or green ichor. Elena watched out of her window as personnel entered and were leaving the buildings, some in lab coats.

"Are those military personnel too?" Elena asked.

"No, those are contracted civilians to work alongside us here. They do research into different fields, but not that much. Edwards AFB



down near Los Angeles does far more for aerospace testing, these guys do more missiles. We launch things. We're the main ground shipyard base on the west coast and the only one that can support a Carrier landing. Most others just are capable of containing cruisers" Jack told her. Elena noticed it was really overcast just above the base, and didn't realize there were any clouds. The weather app on her phone told her it was going to be clear.

Elena looked up and was immediately surprised it didn't come to her attention previously. There, hovering over the base and locked down by huge containment pressure systems was the UNSC Super carrier \_Trafalgar.\_ It seemed to still be under construction.

"Holyâ€¦!" Elena couldn't even finish swearing.

"Exactly. That's the \_Trafalgar\_. It's designed supposedly to actually go toe to toe with Covenant ships of similar size and win. It's still a long ways from being completed though" Jack told her as he pulled into a parking spot near a small building with stairs leading to its front door.

"Ok. Now, grab your things, and let's get inside so you can change" Jack smiled and opened his driver's side door. Elena opened hers and went to grab her things, her suitcase and toiletries bag, as Jack picked up her duffle bag and another bag he had in the flatbed. They walked up the steps and opened the door, which didn't seem to be locked. Inside was filled with rows of bunk beds and tall lockers.

"This is bunk 4-4. Nobody should be here, so you can get changed in the bathroom. You'll need these" He dropped her things on the ground and opened up the spare bag. Inside was a small flight suit.

"I had some difficulty getting your size, had to ask your mother very carefully or she'd figure it out. Can't have you on board without some basics on you" Jack chuckled as she pulled out the flight suit. She looked it over in awe. He even had her name stenciled into the chest tag. She also had some cargo pants and T-shirts as well as some basic boxers for her waist size and some very ugly looking bras.

"Wow! This isâ€¦| this is incredible. I get to wear this?" Elena asked.

"Yup. Helmet's in the Pelican, it's kind of bulky so I didn't bring it along. Go on, try it on" Jack waved towards the bathrooms. Elena rushed towards the bathroom doors and began to get changed. Jack picked up her suitcase and stuck it near a small locker at the foot of a nearby bunk bed.

Elena slowly opened the door and came out, wearing her flight suit. It seemed slightly bulky on her small frame. Jack chuckled at the look she had as she wondered if she was wearing it right.

"Hang on, let's tighten up these straps here" Jack suppressed a laugh as he moved to help her. He pulled on a few straps and tightened some areas down, unlatching some plastic lock harnessing and pushing some of the extra fabric under it. Finally, she looked just like any other pilot.

"There. Now you're all set. Ready to get some flight time Co-pilot?" Jack asked her.

"Wait, I'm you're Co-pilot? Really?" Elena asked in surprise.

"Yup. I pulled a few string and I got authorization. Just some ground rules. When we get to the destinations, no wandering, you stay by me always ok? I doubt anyone would enjoy a teenager dawdling around on a military starship, and absolutely no touching anything unless you get express approval from me, you hear?" Jack told her sternly, waving his hands and pointing at her.

"Got it. How long do we travel? I mean, we're staying in a motel outside Vandenberg right? Right?" Elena asked her father, a little confused.

"Well, here's the thing. I-" Jack was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in" Jack yelled out and the door opened. A guardsmen walked inside and saluted, and Jack returned the salute.

"Private First Class Aidens reporting as ordered sir!" The soldier said, still saluting.

"At ease Private. I need you to take this equipment right here and reload it into military standard issues. Throw the containers back in my pick up when you're done." Jack motioned for the suitcases that Elena had brought. The private seemed a little confused, but quickly snapped to and grabbed the bags.

"Wha, dad? What's going on?" Elena asked, looking a bit surprised.

"He's going to put them in standard issue duffels so we can take them on board and not have them look out of place. Remember those strings I pulled? Wellâ€¦ umâ€¦ you seeâ€¦" Jack looked a little awkward trying to find the words.

"Why is he taking my stuff? We ARE staying in a motel aren't we? Or here right?" Elena pleaded for an answer.

"Look promise you won't freak out ok? I had to get a lot of authorization scrambles and a little bit of faking you're identity in the systems. You ARE my registered Co-pilot, a contracted pilot to be exact" Jack told his daughter. She was stunned.

"I'mâ€¦ I'm not military! I just graduated middle school!" Elena was in shock.

"I know! I know, it's only temporary, and I have some people keeping it a secret. Once we're back down on Earth after the summer, it goes away and no one cares beyond that, it's just-" Jack was interrupted by his daughter.

"What do you mean come back? Where are we going? I thought it was flying supplies to ships in orbit, landing and getting a bite to eat or something, maybe a bit of labor to get the things on board the Pelican! I need info here dad! What did you have planned?" Elena yelled at her father.

"Look. The reason why I've been gone so long on so many occasions isâ€¦ causeâ€¦ well, when I fly support for ships, sometimes those ships aren't near Earth. We'll be boarding the Cruiser Honor Bound and then entering slip space once they've transferred the equipment we have loaded. Once we exit slip space, we'll be near the fortress world Reach." Jack saw stunned silence from his daughter. She didn't know what to say. She just blinked at him processing everything he just told her.

"How long are we staying there? Are we staying on the ship? Are we picking things up there and taking them back? When do we get back? What do I have to do? I don't know now if this was such a good idea dadâ€¦" Elena fired off as many questions as her head could think of.

"It'll be easy, really. Just lie when people ask you your age, say you're eighteen and your rank is Civilian Command Chief Master Sergeant. Once on board the ship, just stay with me, we can go eat or we can go to the gym, there's an entertainment room the marines have set up to stave off boredom during travel, and we'll only be in slip space for a week and a half. We pick up another supply cache or personnel, do a few flight ops between different bases, then get back on board and slip space back to Earth. Simple. No combat, no scary things happening, no weird problems happening. You'll be right beside me the whole time, or the maintenance crew that works on my Pelican. I know them, they're good guys, and I told them about you. Nothing is going to happen ok?" Jack told her, trying to put on a fake smile. She wasn't very happy.

"Alright. Fine. Sure. I justâ€¦ can't we get in a lot of trouble for this? If they find out, you could be discharged dishonorably! They could court martial you orâ€¦ orâ€¦" Elena couldn't think of anything else, the court martial itself entailed quite a few tragic endings.

"They won't, some of the people who know what's going on are my superiors, and they said they'd smooth it out the whole time. They already told me there's authorization for one contracted on board, so another shouldn't be a problem. Think of it as bring your daughter to work day, except it's a whole summer. It'll be fun, I promise" Elena's father put his right hand on her shoulder, then moved it up to her cheek and rubbed his thumb up and down.

"Ok, if you say so. I've never been in slip space before. Anything I should know?" Elena asked and Jack smiled.

"I'll explain everything on the way. You know about all the controls in the cockpit of the Pelican right?" her father asked.

"Yeah, I mean, I studied the whole layout. I did that project for my last science class, remember? Why?" she asked confused as they walked out of the bunk and towards another building.

"You'll see. Let's go get flight prepped. Don't say anything ok? Just listen while they talk and then file out with the rest of us. The briefing is quick and done by my commanding officer, he's a nice guy, but don't do anything to change that alright? He's the one who's watching our backs." Jack opened the door for her and she walked through, seeing multiple large pipes running along the walls and

lights overhead. They made a right turn and walked up a small flight of steps, then opened another door.

There was a long hallway with multiple doors; each one seemed to have a small window set inside. Elena could see into each one, some were empty; others had other pilots in their own briefings. One looked like it was for fighter pilots, but she couldn't be sure.

"This is the room, let's head in" Jack told her, and opened a door marked 'D77-TC OutSupSlip.' Elena went in and found six pairs of eyes set on her. Jack came in behind.

"Lieutenant. Please, have a seat. Sergeant" the Captain smiled. Her father was right, he seemed decent. The other pilots, part of the wing her father was in, chuckled. They must be in on it too.

\*\*[20 minutes later]\*\*

"Jack, come over here for a sec" the captain ordered. The rest of the pilots filed out and Elena stood at the door. The captain started whispering to her father.

"There's a slight problem. Your load is getting transferred to another pelican, and you'll be taking personnel up there instead" the captain made some hand gestures.

"But you told me we were only bringing up maintenance equipment! Shit! This isn't how we planned it! You have to swap it back!" Jack looked worried and paced a few steps then came back.

"I can't. Don't worry; helmets hide a lot of things. Your kid will be fine. The personnel list is right here. As long as you get her into the cockpit before they reach the thing you shouldn't have a problem. Once you're up there, they file out, you escort her to the quarters, easy as pie." Jack started sweating.

"Alright, alright, ok. Fine" Jack said more to himself than to his captain and grabbed the list. Most of the people on the list were enlisted, no Lieutenants or above. Good.

Jack walked over to his daughter and opened the door for her. Elena seemed slightly confused at the situation, but didn't really hear much of the conversation. She walked out of the room and followed her father down the hallway in the opposite direction they came. They turned another corner and went down a long flight of steps, then turned a corner and continued down the stairs.

"How far are we underground?" Elena asked as air seemed to be poured in from vents nearby, somewhat loudly.

"Not that far, maybe two hundred feet. We keep the Pelicans underground to keep the fuel under control. Eases off on maintenance, less cracks or damage to rubber, and stops dirt from spewing around when we lift off. Here we are" Jack said as he walked into the hangar. His Pelican was sitting on the landing platform, the doors closed above it and maintenance crew surrounding it, some walking by. A wheeled hydraulic lift was in the corner, a technician on top of it working with wires entering and exiting the wall. Some welding was seen in the distant corner and someone was machining something in the opposite corner. The hangar was massive.

"Wow" was all Elena could say as she looked around, following her father towards the Pelican. Two maintenance technicians were talking near the nose of the VTOL and stopped and looked at Jack and her.

"Hey man, good to see it worked. Hey there little missy, ready for your first Pelican flight?" one of the technicians asked with a smile.

"Um, I guess wait um that's Sergeant, not little missy!" Elena told them, crossing her arms over her chest. Both technicians oohed and ahed then saluted her.

"Our mistake Sergeant, heh heh. Anyways, Jack, we checked your hydraulics, they look good, your topped up and the personnel are coming down soon, you should get your preflight check done soon" the right technician told him.

"Wilco. Alright fly girl, let us get a move on!" Jack made a fast waving motion for her to run to the back of the VTOL, and Elena complied, stepping aboard the RORO door. The Pelican was much larger than she thought it was; the pictures she had didn't really do it justice. She maneuvered herself towards the cockpit door and looked to the left. Elena pulled down on the lever and pressed the release button for the door to open.

The door slid open and she walked in, followed by her father. He pointed to the seat besides his for her to sit in.

"Hey, wear this" her father told her and handed her a helmet. Taped on the front, was written "Ghost."

"Dad, you didn't" Elena giggled as she ran her fingers over the letters.

"Of course I did! Pilots get nicknames all the time, and you're my little ghost. It fit" he chuckled, and then helped her put the thing on. He strapped it under her chin and asked her if it was too tight. When she was fine with the resistance, he turned around and grabbed a small package from a very small drawer under his seat.

"Here, swallow this. You are probably starving right now. Well, we can't eat at this time, and for good reason. Your first exo flight you don't want to upchuck, so this-" he placed the pill in her gloved hand "is for nausea. You never had it before when we went on that cruise, but leaving the atmosphere does crazy stuff to your stomach the first time you feel it. I'd rather not have the windshield covered in half-digested Wheaties please" he told her with a goofy grin on his face. She giggled and dropped the pill in her mouth, and was given a bottle of water that was also under the seat. She swallowed, then handed the bottle back.

"Now, preflight. Do you have to go to the bathroom? We have one down here just for this time, so if you need to go, do it now. The flight suit is pretty easy to get around when you have to do your business" Jack asked her. She shook her head.

"Ok good. I already got a checklist of maintenance done outside the Pelican by the techs so we just need to do our checklist inside" Jack

said as he put the clipboard away.

"Ok. Now, locking cockpit down" He motioned for her to press some buttons. She pointed at herself in shock, and then pointed at the control board. He nodded and smiled as he pressed some buttons to start the engines. She looked around and remembered what she read about, the flight controls and the different configurations. She flipped one switch and the door to the cockpit locked.

"Now checking all disconnections of outside systems" Jack said as he looked down at any lights showing red for the transports external plug slots. All were green.

"Disengage lock struts" Jack looked over to his daughter again, and she quickly surveyed her control board. She pressed a few buttons and held a lever down, hearing loud THUMPS! Outside as the lock struts disengaged and stopped holding the Pelican in place. The engines were winding up, as exhaust softly seeped from the thruster ports outside the VTOL.

"Checking running lights, all good, flaps and stabs" Jack flipped some of his buttons and heard the high whine of hydraulics moving parts on the small wings.

"Thrust vector check" Elena suddenly blurted out, and Jack looked at her and chuckled.

"That's right, thrust vector check" Jack copied and moved his flight controls around in a small circle. All sensors read green.

"Radio check. GuardTAC this is Echo 2-1-2, testing for flight outbound, how copy?" Jack pushed his helmet mic button on the side of the mask.

"GuardTAC good copy, Echo 2-1-2 you are registered for outbound flight. Your transport package is coming down." Jack pushed the mic button to swap to no outbound radio chatter, and then watched as the door opened to the hangar. In walked nine marines of different sizes, and one ODS. Elena had a look of surprise on her face, as she'd never seen a Hell Jumper before.

"Oh dear!" Elena sighed out as she heard the thumping of boots moving into the back cargo hold.

"Hey, no worries, I'll do the driving; you just sit back and relax. It'll be an interesting show going up there, and you won't really have to do any communications checks or weather in space" Jack reached over and patted Elena on her shoulder, then put both his hands on his controls. Elena was the Co-pilot, so she figured she'd have to constantly monitor things while her father flew, but it seems there wasn't much to monitor given where they would be going.

She noticed the safety bars were being locked into place on a monitor, showing the soldiers were sitting in their seats and buckling up.

On another monitor, the names of the marines and ODS were blinking green once the bars were set in place. All of the names she didn't recognize, not even the ODS who was a Sergeant Edward Buck.

"Ok, that's a go ahead" Jack said and motioned for her to keep quiet as he talked over the coms.

"Attention passengers, this is your captain speaking, we thank you for flying UNSC airlines, we are very happy for you volunteering to be baggage on board this transport. Please keep all arms and legs close to you at all times, except when another marine decides to piss you off, then all bets are off" Jack spoke over the intercom and the marines laughed.

"The weather outside is a comfortable 79 degrees, but you shouldn't give a shit, as we'll be in the cold dark space above Earth in approximately two hours, twenty six minutes. Any faster and you'll have to get out and push, preferably breaking wind at the same time for that little extra thrust" Jack could hear the laughter breaking out in the hold, and Elena fought to not crack up.

"Alright grunts, sit tight for outbound from Vandenberg. We're a dot in four minutes." Jack cut intercom voice from his mic and looked over at his daughter. She watched as the overhead bulkhead doors unlatched and opened slowly, small bits of dirt and dust floating down from the movement. They finally opened fully with a loud CLANG! and Jack took that as his opportunity to engage all thrusters for lift to leave the hangar.

"GuardTAC, Echo 2-1-2 leaving hangar four, outbound now" Jack opened his mic outbound mode again temporarily.

"Copy that Echo 2-1-2, exit at vertical, reach Cherubs 5 and spot to heading 4-4-0 tap 9-2. How copy?" GuardTAC said over the coms.

"Good copy, moving to Cherubs 5 on AGL, spotting nose to heading 4-4-0 tap 9-2. No fuzzies noted" Jack said as he checked the sky, seeing no clouds nearby. The Pelican lifted lazily up to the directed height of 500 feet and turned on a dime, aiming in the direction to exit out of Vandenberg airspace and towards the cruiser they were heading to dock with.

"The air is clear, it's on you Echo 2-1-2. Good flying" GuardTAC said as Jack winked a green response light to them and pushed down on his flight controls to alter the vectors of his thrust, and the Pelican responded and shot forward and up, away from the 86,000 acres of military buildings and missile silos.

The D77-TC flew higher and higher, slowly passing by the hulk that was the Trafalgar. Jack pushed harder on the thrust lever, opening up valves to force more fuel into the engines. Elena watched as they started to move faster and faster, their altitude moving beyond any plane she'd been on. The G forces that were felt were strong, but nothing painful or life threatening. Finally the altimeter changed from feet to kilometers, and she noticed they were above 100km. She thought for a moment.

We must be in the Ionosphere Elena realized they only needed to break past through the exosphere and that was the biggest part of the whole flight mainly. The teenager felt the Pelican go through slight turbulence as they continued up.

"This is the part that's the main show breaker. Once we're out, it's smooth sailing" Jack told her as they pushed further out, the head

around the Pelican growing hotter and hotter. The cockpit's windows tinted automatically to keep the operators from being blinded as a safety measure, though their helmets could do the same.

After a few tense minutes, they were through, and Elena felt her stomach lurch from the weight change.

"Whoaâ€¦!" Elena was grateful for her safety harness keeping her strapped in place in her seat, or she knew she'd slowly float around. She could see the stars so clearly, the sun in the far distance, the moon, all of the twinkling and black space. It felt so peaceful for her. She wanted to unstrap herself and test how weightless she really was, but thought better of it and didn't want to interfere with her father's flying.

"It's ok if you want to float around a bit, we won't board the cruiser for another hour and a half" Jack told her, as if reading her mind.

"Really? I can do that?" Elena asked, looking down to her harness quickly and back up to his helmeted head.

"Sure. We're on a course towards the Honor Bound, so it's mainly just reaching it, speaking to the com officer on duty, gaining boarding clearance, finding the right hangar to enter, docking and then that's it. Until then, I could even take a nap or eat. Go on" Jack motioned for her to try it out.

Elena was hesitant, but then unlatched her straps and unbuckled the harness that held her to her seat. She floated ever so slowly away from it and finally decided to push off, and found herself moving up towards the roof of the cockpit. She steadied herself with one hand on the ceiling and looked around. Her father was under her, looking up as she looked at him upside down.

"This is awesome!" she laughed as she felt her hands slowly over the ceiling and tried to pull herself along. It didn't work as well as she expected, and her legs swung out over her head from the forward 'thrust' she was exhuming to get towards the door.

"You've never had zero g training before. You're moving like a toddler losing their balance" Jack chuckled at her and she frowned under her helmet.

"Hey! It's my first time doing this! This is a whole new experience! It feels likeâ€¦ like nothing stops you from going somewhere, anywhere you want." Elena finished her odd half somersault on the ceiling and tried to hold onto something to keep herself steady. There were a few handles on the ceilings for door panels, and she grabbed one to keep herself from floating away.

"There is actually. Air still creates friction, and eventually you'd stop given time, though it would still be awhile" Jack let out a small laugh and reached up for her hands. She pushed off slowly, trying to get a feel for how her body moved in zero g, and felt her father's hand close on her right. He pulled her down a bit and gently pushed her towards her seat.

"Here's something else. Take a look outside." Elena pulled herself into her seat just as he told her to look.



Outside, almost covering the Earth in a very light blanket, so light you could barely see it, was a thin metallic film. She looked closer and squinted. She soon found out it wasn't a complete layer, but many smaller objects. Old satellites still orbiting the Earth, space junk from shuttles going by, long spent booster rockets and damaged armor plates from older frigates.

"That stuff is still out there? I thought the UEG already put a recycling act in effect to clean this up" Elena asked, shocked that there was so much floating around their home world.

"Do you have any idea how much stuff is out there? The recycling act was only put into effect ten years ago, to clean up this mess it would take another twenty at least, that's if we ever got the chance. There are more important things to worry about these days" Jack said to her, looking away and checking his radar.

"The Covenant" Elena whispered more to herself than her father.

Jack pointed in the distance and Elena could see a trio of small white dots—no, triangular looking objects.

"What are those?" Elena asked.

"It's a testing sector for a new defensive perimeter around Earth, just in case. MAC platforms, battle clusters of three each. Those are just the first of the clusters being built, just under 36 thousand kilometers over the Mediterranean." Elena's father pressed a button and a monitor zoomed in on the small objects. The skeleton of each could be seen plain as day, with little white transports floating around them like specks of dust.

"How powerful are they?" Elena asked him.

"Don't know honey, I just deliver supplies and personnel to and from ships. Doubt they'd tell me anything like that." Jack grabbed at his helmet and twisted slowly, hearing the hiss of the rubber locks decoupling from his flight suit and air escaping. He removed his helmet and placed it nearby.

"The Pelican is pressurized remember? The helmet isn't really needed when nothing is happening. I'm going to take a small cat nap while we get there. We'll eat once we get on board. You should take a nap too, or you can just look around, your choice" Elena's father smiled towards her.

"Eh, I'm pretty awake right now, I'll just watch and listen to my music from my phone" she said and pulled her small phone from one of the pockets and pulled two small cordless ear phones with it. Elena took her helmet off as well, and felt a slight tug as rubber seals brushed against the hair band that was holding her long black hair in a bun. She popped one ear phone in each ear and turned the phone on, searching through her library for a song she liked. Jack shrugged and pushed a button on his seat to recline a bit, closing his eyes.

The remainder of the flight looked like it would be uneventful for the both of them.

### 3. Adventure Like No Other Pt2

(Author's Note: Okay, I had to cut the last chapter on that sentence because of the fact that if I continued I would have gotten the whole summer in there, and if I did that I would have tried to condense the adventure and that would be bad (The chapter was already reaching 11,000 words soâ€¦ yeah... besides, the whole small Adventure she has will take a few chapters to tell anyways.) Also add in the fact I was sleepy and decided to take a nap, then figured to start another chapter after. Yeah. .â€¦| .â€¦| \*hides\*)

Elena woke her father up quick as she saw the metal object in the distance.

"Dadâ€¦| DAD! Wake up!" Elena pushed her father to open his eyes.

"Whaâ€¦| huh? Oh. What's up?" Jack asked her.

"There, we're almost there" Elena told him and pointed out the cockpit windows.

"Heck honey, we aren't very close if the range alarm doesn't go off-" Jack didn't even get a chance to finish when a small alarm went off near him telling him he was near his arrival point.

"Never mind" Jack mumbled and flipped the switch to turn the alarm off as Elena re-situated herself back in her seat and strapped herself in. She reached for her helmet and saw that it had floated down under the control panels and bobbed its way around there. She grabbed it and pushed it over her head, hearing the suction hiss of the coupling rubber and seals. Her father did the same.

"That'sâ€¦| that's not the cruiser is it?" Elena asked.

"Nope. Space Station AEGIS-1. Old Station platform we used to use back when we were just colonizing what we could in our solar system. It has been revamped multiple times to keep it operational, but I don't know how long it will stay useful for us. We might just want to think about cutting our losses and constructing a new one" Jack told her as she watched the thing come into view.

Elena squinted her eyes as they came closer, and hit the magnify feature on the dash control panel. The station looked long and bulbous on its head, with multiple grooves and what looked like potholes carved into it. Along the middle section were long arms with huge rectangular boxes rotating around its waist, and she realized these were where the crew probably lived. Three smaller struts poked away from the middle two rings towards both the bottom and top of the station, at a diagonal axis and acted as coupling docks for starships. One of them happened to have a cruiser attached to it, the Honor Bound. A small ball was held in the middle with an even smaller platform attached to that. Elena figured that was the CIC.

"Are we heading to the station or the ship?" Elena asked.

"Ship, the station is just there for refueling mostly. The top bulb section is actually a collection plant. It doesn't gather as much as you think around here, but in the long run in between ships it

collects enough for a full tank in each Pelican, Long Sword, and any other support craft the ship carries with it" Elena's father explained.

The Pelican drifted towards the combined metal forms and Jack started the engines up.

"This is your captain speaking, please buckle your seat belts and douse any cigarettes you were stupid enough to smoke in that confined space" Jack said over the intercom to the cargo hold. The marines would most likely wake from a cat nap.

"This is Echo 2-1-2 calling Honor Bound. Requesting clearance to land, how copy?" Jack said over the com channels towards the Marathon class cruiser.

"Good copy Echo 2-1-2, this is Honor Bound CIC. Clearance is provided, switch to heading 4-6-9 tap 2-4-4 tap 8-7. Lock your thrust, keep it slow. You're cleared to enter hangar nine."

"Wilco CIC. Echo 2-1-2 out." Jack cut outbound and looked over at Elena. She was watching the controls as monitors were returning visual data on their current position in space, celestial object range, radiation levels outside the troop carrier, and other bits of information to help with reaching their destination without a mishap.

The Pelican swooped quickly towards the cruiser and slipped under its belly. It followed along and slowed down to the required safe landing speed for the hangar before they were even near it. Small puffs from the thrusters maneuvered the craft down and aiming right at the hangar. Jack waited for the outside door to open slowly, the landing lights turning on. Two Long Swords flew by, one being the wingman, and Elena watched them with keen interest.

"Echo 2-1-2, this is the LSO, prep to watch the meatball and get dirty in thirty seconds; don't get your tail stuck in the spud locker" Jack heard come from the LSO on duty.

"Wilco, Echo 2-1-2 has the ball. I am entering through the outside doors. Range 300 feet, 200 feet, 100 feet, 50 feet, 25 feet and dropping speed further, I am on the ball."

Jack slowly pushed the Pelican forward into the open maw of the hangar outside armored door.

"Three down and locked" Jack said and slowly landed the troop carrier down on the platform below it. The outside doors closed, and the area was pressurized, the inner bulkhead doors opening up and the platform they were on slid forward on hydraulics. A circular platform set inside the square one they rode swiveled the Pelican around to face the bulkhead doors.

"Three-nine line 180 complete. We'll drain remainder fuel after package is gone. You're good to go" the LSO said and Jack flipped a few switches and pressed some buttons. The engines calmed down and the Pelican started to go dormant.

"We're here. We'll wait for the 'packages' to leave before we exit ourselves. Dropping the RORO" Jack told Elena and pressed a button to

open the Pelican bay door.

"Now, no one should give you any problems as long as you stick to me like glue, because there are some soldiers on board that look as young as you do. How are you holding up?" Jack asked his teenage Co-pilot.

"A little scared, but more excited than anything." Elena sighed and unstrapped herself as Jack did the same. He turned the running lights off outside and walked to the cockpit door. He unlocked a small locker on the side and opened it. Inside were three duffel bags, one of them being his.

"All your stuff is inside the other two. I already have our assigned quarters. It's a bunk room, but it's only temporary for the night, then we get separate rooms right after. They're just sorting people around a bit at the moment I heard" Jack told Elena as she got up and pulled herself away from the seat.

"Heyâ€¦ umâ€¦ I heardâ€¦ I heard the bathrooms areâ€¦ umâ€¦ co-edâ€¦ uhâ€¦" Elena stood there nervously.

"Ohâ€¦ well, I'll put in a suggestion for you to get an officer's special quarters. They tend to get their own bathroom. It's a hole in the wall, but it's separate from everyone else" Jack realized the predicament she would be in if he couldn't get her assigned to a room with its own facilities.

"I should tell you that if you take a shower, because of the limits on water on a ship, the water shuts off after five minutes, so shampoo your hair quick, soap your body, wash it off as fast as you can, and hopefully it doesn't turn off mid-way. If it does, there's no way to turn it back on, as it's got a kill timer until water is pumped into the small holding tank for the room. It's to stop anyone from just turning the shower back on. For the showers in the co-ed bathrooms it's a little different, but only because there is a palm reader and it'll recognize you trying to turn it back on." Jack picked up his duffel after a minute as Elena sighed and straightened up, then she picked up one of the duffels and clumsily tried to pick up the other.

"I'll get that one, don't worry" her father chuckled and reached to grab it. She eagerly handed it to him, and she pulled the lever and pushed the release button. The cockpit slid open and with an odd surprise, the ODST was standing there with his helmet off.

Elena just stood there in the doorway, stunned. He looked down at her then up to her father, both still wearing their helmets.

"Hey there shorty, I'd assume you're the Co-pilot? I know, I know, bad joke. Couldn't resist though" Buck chuckled as Elena looked annoyed under her helmet.

\_Apparently not all ODSTs were hardcore soldiers. Some were wisecracking idiots\_ she thought to herself

"Sergeant, shouldn't you be getting off our troop carrier and checking in with the CIC?" Jack quickly loomed over his daughter.

"Just wanted to compliment you on such a smooth ride. Normally when I get on a Pelican the whole trip is bumpy and filled with marines dropping their lunches everywhereâ€¦ after they ate it" Buck chuckled and held his hand out to shake Jack's.

"I would have to take a guess, but I'd assume the reason it was bumpy was the pilot was trying to dodge active AAA. Regardless, don't you Hell Jumpers go down in HEVs?" Jack asked the Sergeant.

"Going DOWN, yes. Going up, we still need you crate flyers to bring us back. I'd hate to see what crazy mind would think up adding rockets to the bottom of our HEVs to kill the way we work right now." Buck let out a low whistle, and Elena had a comical idea of an ODST going back up in the same pod he dropped in, screaming the whole way.

"It's nice to feel needed" Jack chuckled under his helmet, taking what Buck said as a compliment.

"Oh you're definitely needed, probably more than me. Well, I'll let you two get to your assigned quarters, I'll go check in with the ship gods. I'll see you guys around hopefully while we're in slip space or Reach" Buck smiled and waved goodbye, both Elena and Jack returned the wave as he stepped out of the cargo hold and down the RORO.

"He seems nice" Elena said to her father.

"Most ODSTs try and be super hardcore killer types, but under all that show and bravado their men with lives just like anyone else. Some have families; others even have pets and potted plants. I know one that has a small herb garden that he lugs around in his carry locker." Elena was surprised at hearing about the herb garden. Jack nudged his daughter in the arm and motioned with his head for her to head off the troop carrier.

Both of their boots clunked as they walked down the RORO and then towards the air boss.

"Landing was good, gear is in good condition, and I know you were sleeping on the job" the officer stated to Jack, and Elena's father dropped the duffels on the ground in astonishment.

"Yeah, I figured you did. Your inbound had no maneuver beyond our ACK range, so I knew you were probably checking for light leaks." The Air Boss looked serious, and then broke into a smile and laughed a bit.

"No worries Lieutenant, it's a boring trip out, we've all done it. Grab your things; your packhorse is in good condition. Head out" The Air Boss, apparently a higher rank than her father, patted him on the shoulder and then walked off. Jack sighed in relief.

"Figured as much" Jack picked up the duffels and nodded his head towards the door again. Elena followed and they walked to the door, jarring along with the duffels in hand.

"Wait, hold up" one of the air crew walked up to them. Both of them looked over at him.

"Drop your helmets on the rack over there, we'll get them back in

your bird once we drain the fuel" the airman told them. Elena felt her heart jump into her throat.

"Alright" Jack responded and took his helmet off. He looked towards Elena and she at first didn't do anything, then pointed to herself in mock 'you want me to do it too?' then reached up. She twisted the helmet and pulled, and felt the thing decouple and hiss. She pulled the helmet off and placed it on the rack.

"Huhâ€¦ pretty young looking for a pilot" the air crew said.

"Is there a problem with my Co-Pilot, airman?" Jack asked him sternly.

"No sir! Just observing sir!" the airman stood at attention immediately.

"There are marines who are young as well, fresh out of boot. You'd do well to remember that" Jack told him.

"Yes sir! I will sir! My apologies sir!" the airman yelped out.

"At ease and get back to work" Jack nodded in a direction.

"Yes sir!" and with that, the airman shot off to continue working.

Jack walked out the automatic doors as Elena followed him, and then turned a corner towards a lift. They waited for a minute as the lift came down to their deck, then entered as the doors opened. One marine stood inside, but he was so focused on a data pad he didn't seem to notice or care about them entering. Jack pressed a button for deck seventy two.

"It's a general deck for everything" Jack whispered to Elena out of the corner of his mouth.

They felt the lift move, and waited another minute before the doors opened and the marine walked out.

"Not our deck. A few more" Jack openly said to her.

The lift closed its doors and continued on, arriving at deck 72. They both walked out, Jack moving along smoothly with his daughter in tow. He turned a corner and walked past three doors before stopping.

"This is it, D72-Q149-B2" Jack told her and keyed in the code he was given at the flight briefing.

The door opened and inside was a small room with a bunk bed in the corner. To the left of it was a double level locker. Just in front of the locker by two feet was a small desk against the wall with a small data terminal. There was a trunk at the foot of the bunk bed. The bunk bed looked like it folded into the wall to make extra space.

"Home sweet home until tomorrow" Jack said as he walked in and dropped both duffels on the ground. Elena followed and did the same, and stooped to unzip the duffel.

"No need to get unpacked, you'll have a different room by tomorrow. This is what we pilots call "the waiting room." It's here for temporary reprieve for pilots that aren't assigned to the ship, and will eventually leave. We aren't leaving quite just yet, but this room is really only stayed in for 24 hours or less." Jack pushed the duffels into the corner and Elena stood up.

"So, how do we find out which rooms we have after?" She asked, confused.

"I'll check with the A.I. on board this ship. He'll get us situated quick. I'll submit the requests right now." Her father walked over to the terminal and activated it, typing in his login and pulled out a special key fob attached to his dog tags. He pressed a button and the fob turned on, and Elena realized it was a military authenticator that changed every twenty four hours. He typed some things into the terminal, and then turned the machine off.

"There. I requested a special officer's quarters with special needs and rated it temporary, so it's almost a guarantee. I'll more than likely have a room nearby, as since it's not permanent we sort of get a little pampering. My rank isn't exactly high, but I'm still an officer, and since you're associated with me as my Co-pilot, they give the same treatment." Jack smiled down at his daughter poked her side. She giggled and moved away from the ticklish poking.

"Come on, I bet you're starving. NOW we can go get something to eat. It's an odd hour so most personnel are usually at their stations or asleep from working the grave shift. Perfect time to sneak you over there and grab some food without any questions. Remember, you are eighteen on board this ship ok? Civilian contracted, Command Chief Master Sergeant. No one will screw with you as long as you don't blab anything odd. If anyone asks you anything when I'm not nearby, tell them to see me, I'm got the orders from high. They'll know what that means. If they pursue, you're just the civie contracted. After that, they CANNOT do anything to you, because they should know you aren't officially military. If they try, they could potentially give out Intel they shouldn't, and they'll get in trouble and you're Scott free" Jack explained to her, drilling her just in case something would happen.

"Alright. Got it" Elena sighed and took a deep breath.

"The DFAC is two decks below us. You should always follow me except when you get your room, but if you ever get lost, go to a corner with a terminal like this" he pointed to the terminal "and type coordinate reference terminal in the query box. You don't need a login for that; it's to give people their bearings if they forget where they are, though any military personnel who do that you don't want on this ship anyways. It's mainly for officials who don't stay here often but need to get around." Her father watched her as she nodded her head in acknowledgement.

"Ok. Let's go." Jack opened the door and walked out, Elena following quickly behind. They walked to the lift again, and got inside. He pressed the deck two floors below them and waited for the lift to descend with a hum. When it stopped, he walked out and Elena followed. They walked through a few hallways until they saw overhead "DINING FACILITIES" with an arrow pointing to a pair of double

automatic doors.

"Usually when you see any form of DFAC or other room that a person doesn't sleep in, you will notice the doors will actually change color. Grey is standard for quarters, red is for armory or critical areas so don't go in those without me being with you, green is usually recreation or food, something for personnel creature comforts or eating. Orange is always living amenities like laundry or post office." Jack pointed to the doors. The mess hall was green colored.

"Blue is ship critical zones, like engineering, the bridge, main armory or flight deck. Don't ever go through those. The marines stationed at those doors will always check for identification, and if you don'tâ€¦" Jack formed his hand into a gun and pointed it at his head, then made a bang noise with his mouth. Elena's eyes widened.

"But don't worry, green is good, grey is good. Orange let me know, everything else is bad, got it?" Elena nodded in acknowledgement.

Jack walked towards the doors and they slid open, and Elena followed him closely as he walked towards the food counter. The cooks behind it were busy preparing the meals for when dinner would be officially started.

"The three main meals are when you'll find the variety to be the worst to get anything worthwhile, but food is served twenty four hours a day for all shift schedules on board. The main meals usually aren't the best tasting cause they make them en masse, but it will fill you up and keep you going very well. Outside of the main meals you can find the cooks screwing around sometimes with anything spare they want to make like cookies, and dried snacks and powdered drinks are always available." Jack grabbed two trays and handed one to her. Elena placed hers on the counter and slid it down, grabbing a plate and some utensils.

"I'd suggest trying to grab a pack of milk or juice if you can, it goes quick as it doesn't store well after long distance travels, simply because it just gets picked up too quick. Once it's gone, ship personnel resort to powdered versions, and you do NOT want to taste those. Luckily we're only in slip space for a week, so the amount of supplies should be fine, but don't drink the powdered junk" Jack tells her, making a weird face in disgust. Elena giggled and grabbed a small carton of milk and carton of orange juice, taking his advice. Elena went to grab at a salad, before her father blocked her hands.

"You want something heavy, trust me, it'll help with sleeping. Don't tell me you're watching your girlish figure, you'll burn it off I know you will" her father smiled and winked at her.

"I don't really like greasy food" she protested.

"Carbs substitutes for stress Elena, and tends to calm the nerves. We aren't flying anywhere, and you'd be surprised how fast pilots burn it off. Trust me" he said, and then grabbed a small packet of pills from a basket and plopped one on her tray.



"Those are vitamins A, B, C, D, E, and small amounts of iron and zinc, plus a few others like flax seed oil. Most personnel won't take those, but a good pilot grabs it immediately every morning. It'll supplement for anything your food won't give you to keep your body working, and in flying, you want yourself working as well if not better than your ride." Elena didn't really care for the heavy food, but she could live with it. The vitamins she could easily take.

Both of them slid up to an open window.

"What order?" the cook behind it asked him.

"Two cheeseburgers, well done. Nothing else on them, anything else on the side" her father told him.

"You want fries or slaw?" the cook asked.

"Two slaws." Jack looked over at Elena. "You wanted to get a salad. This is a form of salad, just shredded. Best of both worlds" he smiled at her.

"I hate coleslaw thoughâ€|" she whispered to him.

"You don't like coleslaw? Hmmmâ€| hey crewman, sorry, could you make it fries for one and one slaw? Appreciate it" he said over the counter.

"Sure thing, one potato, one slaw" the cook said and grabbed a small bowl and took an ice cream scoop, dunked it into a small vat and scooped up some pre made coleslaw and dumped it into the bowl. He put it on another plate while a second cook prepared the burgers. He then grabbed a bag of pre made fries and dumped them in a frying vat.

"Hmmm, you just made the better choice it seems" Jack winced as they both looked over the counter as the crewmen made them their meals. It took less than a minute before the burgers were ready and served to them.

"Thanks" Jack told the cooks and they nodded then turned around to get back to work. Jack and Elena walked over to a table and were about to sit down when they saw it was already inhabited by a very large, very pale man.

"Apologies" Jack said and walked to the next table, with Elena in tow almost staring at the man. He was easily over 6'5", and looked like he was chiseled out of stone. The clothes he wore seemed like they'd rip if he flexed, and his skin was almost pure white. He watched her with a stone face as she walked by, and it scared her a bit. She quickly looked away and followed her father to another table.

"Was that an ODST?" Elena whispered as quietly as she could to her father.

"Maybe, doesn't look too friendly though. Hmmm, best to leave him be" Jack said and tore open a ketchup packet. He squirted the ketchup on top of his cheeseburger while Elena tore open her vitamin packet. She was about to swallow all of them when she noticed the large soldier watching her.

"Umâ€¦" she mumbled to herself before pushing the pills into her mouth and taking a swig of milk. She swallowed and took a packet of ketchup and poured its contents onto her cheeseburger. Jack heard the mumble and noticed she was trying to avoid looking at the soldier. He leaned back and looked over his shoulder half chewing a mouthful of his burger. The man was staring down at a tray of mostly finished food, still chewing something in his mouth. From the looks of the wrappers and plates, he had just downed more food than Jack could eat in a day.

"Damn if I could eat like him I'd be a blimp in no time! Of course the way he is built, he probably has a metabolism to burn it all off. Heh, lucky guy" Jack shook his head slightly with a small grin and continued eating his burger.

"Master Chief, report to the bridge. Master Chief, report to the bridge" was suddenly heard over the intercom. The pale man stood up and took his tray to a trash can. He dumped the remainder inside while holding the plates and placed the tray on top. He walked through the double doors.

"Whatâ€¦ that wasâ€¦ we just sawâ€¦" Jack looked surprised and Elena was wide eyed.

"Really? We'reâ€¦ we're on the same ship as a Spartan? Wow!" Elena started smiling while eating her food, and Jack smiled too.

"Maybe I should get his autograph, "for my little girl back home" maybe?" Jack tried to laugh with a mouthful of food.

"Dadth! Don'th!" she tried to say with a mouthful of burger. He laughed even more as she giggled while eating. Jack realized just then it would be awkward if she called him anything other than his name.

"Hey, I need to ask you to do something I just remembered. Unless we're alone, call me Lieutenant or by my name alright? If they know we're, you know, related, it could start questions." Jack picked up a fork and started to eat his slaw.

"Alright. Umâ€¦ our last nameâ€¦" Elena tried to think of how to finish her sentence.

"I used your mother's maiden name in the entry log for you, so just stick with that and it'll be fine" Jack told her. Elena looked up at the lights for a moment thinking as she swallowed another mouthful.

\_Mom's maiden name was Espritâ€¦\_ Elena thought for a moment.

"Are you almost done?" Jack asked her as she swallowed another mouthful of her burger. She looked down at her tray and really didn't want to finish her fries, though she did drink her milk and orange juice.

"Yeah, I think so" Elena dropped the small amount of burger leftovers onto her plate as her father got up and carried his tray to the trash can. Elena stood up and copied him, then dropped her tray on top.

"Don't we get, I don't know, a debriefing or something?" Elena asked her father.

"That's only for combat missions, transport it's practically a no brainer. We fly, we drop off, we pick up, we fly some more, we do what we can to not crash. Pretty simple." Jack grinned and tousled her hair.

"Have you ever flown a combat mission before?" she asked as they walked out of the DFAC, the automatic double doors opening as they sensed motion. Jack thought for a moment.

"Well, my Pelican isn't equipped for combat purposes, to lighten the load for heavier transport. The frame is a bit reinforced to allow extended fuel tanks for longer ranges, but that's about it. I flew once through a heated standoff between UNSC and a small rebel group, but they didn't really have anything anti air, so a few small arms rounds pinged off the outside." Jack turned around and saw Elena looked extremely worried.

"Were you hurt?" she squeaked out.

"Of course not sweetheart, the plating on the outside of the Pelican is pretty tough. Small arms are just that, small. It doesn't do anything to a troop carrier. It has the capability if fired just right to interfere with thrusters or slightly damage a flap, but unless there is a huge amount of it flying, it's highly doubtful it can bring down a Pelican." Her father smirked and put his arm around her shoulders.

"You worry too much. You should relax. Let's head to the bathrooms. Do you need to take a leak? Because I sure do. Afterwards let's check the entertainment room." Elena did feel pretty tuckered out from everything that was happening. She didn't even know what time it was.

"Hey, uh, Lieutenant, what time is it?" Elena sheepishly asked, as calling her father by his rank felt odd as it came out of her mouth.

"It's 1700 hours by my chrono, but when we're in slip space it'll be hard to tell time as it screws with some equipment that tracks stuff. Your body's time clock also gets played havoc with the different dimensions." Jack asked her if she knew what civilian time that was.

"Umâ€¦ it'sâ€¦ five o'clock?" Elena spoke.

"Yup. Come on, my back teeth are floating." Jack walked down the hallway and to the left, and continued towards a lift. He walked in as the doors opened and two engineers walked out and passed by Elena, both giving her a glance then continuing on. The lift ascended two decks then stopped, and the doors openedâ€¦ to reveal the Master Chief standing there. Elena felt her stomach sink and her heart rise, and almost hiccupped in response to the feeling. He walked in and turned around behind them, no one saying a word.

The lift ascended another deck and the doors opened, but during that time Elena could feel the Spartan's eyes watching her and her father, and was worried he was suspicious as to why she was there. She stood

as stiff as a board until her father walked out and she followed quickly, risking a glance over her shoulder to see his eyes were still on her as the doors closed.

"That was awkwardâ€¦" she whispered to herself as she continued walking. Jack turned a corner and she quickly followed, only to accidentally bump into the chest of an ODS.

"Hey hey, where's the fire? You're quick to get around." It was the Sergeant from the Pelican trip, Edward Buck.

"S-sorry" she said as she moved around him.

"No harm done. Hey, you didn't happen to see a blonde haired woman go by here did you?" Buck asked her. Elena shook her head.

"Hmmm, must have missed her then. Anyways, I told you I'd see you guys again, this ship isn't that big. You two going to the entertainment room later? They restocked the movies and games, and I'm itching to see if I can actually beat one of you fly boys, or girls, at your own game" Buck smirked.

Elena looked to her father, and he shrugged and pointed to her. "She gets to decide, though we were heading there after" he said. Buck looked down at her and crossed his arms over his chest, grinning and waiting for a response.

"Uh, ok, sure" Elena squeaked out, feeling awkward and put on the spot.

"Great! There's usually a competition of some sort happening, though it depends on which game is played. Some of them we automatically know who will win, but you never know. New blood is always appreciated. I'll be there in a half hour, see you guys there!" Buck said and waved goodbye as he headed down another hallway.

"Great, even more people will see I'm not supposed to be hereâ€¦ Elenaâ€¦ you are stupid stupid stupidâ€¦" Elena chastised herself.

"Hey, don't worry, as long as everyone is having a good time there, no one says anything except when they're drunk, and food and drink aren't allowed near the electrical entertainment. There's too high of a chance to damage something with liquid spills, and the whole room is most likely built with donations from the marines. Without it, the ship does get kind of boring in slip space" Jack chuckled and put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her close as they walked.

He let go and walked through a door, asking her if she needed to go as well. She nodded and they walked in, took a stall, and did their business. Elena could hear movement outside and heard two pairs of footsteps walk by and towards the standing stalls.

"Hey, did you see that Peli pilot that came on board from Echo 2-1-2? Pretty young looking isn't she?" One of the male voices said.

"Yeah, she was cute though. Wonder if she's single" the other voice said.

"Knowing your luck, she'd knock you on your ass and call you a pig.

Still, time in slip space gets to people, she might like a bit of "intimate physical entertainment" huh?" the first male voice responded.

Both of them laughed and she heard the zipping of pants and two flushes, then the movement of boots and nothing else. She finished and opened her stall just as her father did, both of them popping their heads out of the doors and looking at each other after.

"I'll kill them" Jack growled, before Elena shot her hand out.

"If you do anything they'll know you're either related to me or something else, which I'd rather not say cause it would feel weird saying it. Besides it could get us in trouble" Elena looked a little flabbergasted by what she heard.

"What, like you're my girlfriend or something? Wait, now that I just said that, you're right, it does feel weird, forget I said anything" Jack shook his head to get the thought out of his mind. She nodded in agreement.

"Alright, fine, but if they try anything or make a move, I'm dropping them out an airlock. I don't care if you are "temporarily on contract to the Air Force"" Jack made quote notations with his fingers for emphasis "you're still young. Everything's going to be fine ok?" her father put on a comforting smile and hugged her.

"Ok dad. Whatever" she giggled and hugged him back, and then pulled back and they both walked out of the bathroom.

"Let's go check out the entertainment room" Jack told her, and she nodded.

They walked for a few minutes down a hallway and walked up a flight of stairs.

"What's the stairs for if there are lifts?" Elena asked, noticing chains inside of metal pipes as safety rails on the sides.

"In the event of power loss in the area, you can still reach an evacuation point or get to a higher deck. Safety purposes mostly, but it sometimes helps if you don't want to take the lift, like if it's full and you don't want to wait, or avoid certain people." Jack pointed back the way they came with two fingers, and Elena figured he meant the marines who were in the bathroom. "Ah" she said, and they continued up the stairs and through a small hatch. They walked a short distance and found a door hidden in a small alcove with a keypad on the side.

"This should be it" Jack said and pressed the open button. There wouldn't be a lock on a public room.

The door slid open, and they walked in. The floor had a mish mash of carpets and rugs thrown around on the ground, and a few couches facing a decent sized entertainment system. Multiple gaming consoles were lying in front of the two trideo TVs, with controllers strewn about. In the corner were multiple bookshelves holding fairly worn books. There were three tables in the opposite corner, one looking to be used for poker or card games while the other two just for sitting or maybe eating. A smaller bookshelf was sitting next to the

entertainment system with an assortment of video crystals, names written next to them of the movies. A few very worn looking leather chairs were strewn near the couches, and two night stands behind the couch aimed at the TV. There was a stack of metal chairs in the corner, one on top of another if extra people came in. Elena could see an accordion wall that could be pulled down the middle of the room, just in case anyone got too loud while the other side of the room was reading. Smaller portable tables were stacked next to the metal chairs. The whole room seemed big, enough to fit about 200 people.

"Let's have a look at the game list" Elena told her father, and he nodded in agreement and sat down on the couch, as Elena checked what was inside one of the consoles and looked at the list available. Most of them were first person shooters, some were boxing games, others were fighter piloting. One happened to be a dating simulation, and it looked fairly new with almost no wear on it. She figured no one had the guts to play it in front of others and live through the embarrassment.

"I'll try this one, you want to play too?" Elena turned around and showed her father a flight simulation game she picked out, and he declined.

"I'll just watch and relax." He sat back and sunk into the couch. Elena pushed the crystal into the console and it started up just as Buck came through the door.

"Once a pilot always a pilot, same thing every time" Buck chuckled and watched as she turned around and saw him.

"What?" Elena asked confused.

"Nothing, just all the pilots tend to play those games to show how awesome they are, showing off their Epeen or something. Personally I go for the boxing games, but there's only so much you can take of one A.I. cheating before you give up" Buck put his fists up in mock battle for emphasis.

"Maybe it's because you just suck at that game Eddy" an ODST across the room playing poker yelled out.

"You're just jealous I beat you on level one you bastard. What's wrong, can't figure out left stick makes you actually go left?" Buck retorted.

"You rigged that fight!" the ODST yelled back.

"You can't rig the game pal; it's called reading a manual. You should try it sometime" Buck responded. The Hell Jumper waved him off in annoyance and continued playing his poker game. Buck sat down in a lazy boy chair and watched as Elena pressed the start button.

"Okâ€¦ let's see the tutorial" Elena said to herself and swapped through menus until she could see what each button did. The game was fairly complicated, as it gave quite a few available buttons to change thrust speed, weapons, maneuvering and calibrations, as well as HUD information. She accepted her first mission, which seemed easy enough, and slowly got the hang of the game. She flew her virtual fighter through anti air weaponry fired up at her and dropped her

bombs where she needed, then took out one other virtual fighter that didn't put up much of a fight for her. She targeted multiple SAM systems with smaller air to ground missiles and finished the mission.

"I guess that was just training?" Elena asked Buck.

"Nah, that was a real mission missy, and in all honesty, you finished it pretty quick. You figured out the controls awfully fast, or did you just know how to move the fighter well enough outside of the game?" Buck asked her.

"I've never flown that type of fighter in my life, or played this" Elena responded.

"Well, you sure could have fooled me. I bet you could give a few of the fighter pilots on board a run for their money if you wanted to" Buck grinned at her.

"Who could give us a run for our money?" Buck heard and whipped around his head to see four men walk in through the door in T-shirts and muscle shirts, green cargo pants and dog tags. They all wore brown combat boots.

"Ah, was wondering when you rocket riders were gonna show up! Where are the others?" Buck asked and shook hands with one of the pilots.

"They're right behind us; they had to do a little PT to work out some stiff muscles. Last flight test was kinda bumpy through the atmosphere. Earth was always different from the rest" the pilot grinned and chuckled.

"That she is, that she is. Hey, we got some new blood on the couch if you're interested in playing. How about it? What about you missy? Interested?" Buck asked.

"Whaâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I just started playing; I'm probably nowhere near as good as they are!" Elena looked at him bewildered.

"You shot through that first mission like a pro, just try a few others, you'll be fine against them after" Buck chuckled and the other pilots cocked their eyebrows at the slight insult. Elena sighed and looked at her father who put his hands up in surrender. He wanted to stay out of this.

"Alright, let me just get used to this then" Elena told him, and Buck grinned.

"Great, another nurkin head to knock on their ass" the first pilot, 2nd Lieutenant E. Pelkin on his dog tags, said. Elena twitched at that. She had always thought she was pretty decent in games, though she'd never flown a real aircraft before like they did. She was now open to the challenge.

The troops started to set up the second TV which was nearby, just so there wasn't any split screen and no screen watching between pilots. They could play without seeing each other do anything.

Elena pressed start and accepted the next mission, a simple dog fight

with other fighters. She had a squadron of fighters on her side too, so it was again somewhat easy. She didn't want it to be easy, so she challenged herself to get all the kills by herself and not let her A.I. buddies help. She entered the mission and immediately boosted forward to gain a speed edge over her allies, and saw a lock from one of the enemy fighters.

"Better move or they're gonna get you missy" Buck chuckled and the pilots watched in amusement. Elena continued on her speed run until the enemy fired. She had read that you could lead a missile already locked on you towards another enemy fighter and have it lose its lock. The tone changed and a missile flew away from the enemy and towards her. She rolled right and barely dodged the attack, but the missile was returning for another chance. She rocketed towards an enemy fighter and fired her cannons, tearing into its engines and slowing it down. She buzzed passed him and flew on, the missile that was chasing her now having to go on its path through the enemy fighter. She ignored it now and fired a flare behind her to keep the second fighter from trying to return fire with its own missiles, and continued on to the first attacker.

"Wow, didn't expect that! She's actually pretty good!" Buck's eyebrows rose in surprise, and the other pilots murmured while they sat and watched, Pelkin observing with disdain. Elena got a lock on the first fighter and fired her own missile, seeing a flare pop out to drop the lock she had on him.

"One missile lost, didn't you expect him to try and stay alive? They aren't gonna just drop out of the sky for you" Pelkin sarcastically said. Elena was annoyed and quickly remembered the newer missiles you could technically fly by a guide connection, but most pilots couldn't control the missile and the fighter at the same time, except when flying a two seated aircraft. She was in a one seater.

She hoped the game allowed her to switch her view while she piloted her fighter, and it did, but before she tried it she sprayed the air quickly with cannon fire to get the fighter to not turn around and return fire. She swapped to missile connection and guided the missile past the flare and just long enough for it to regain lock, then swapped back to her fighter quickly and bled her speed, falling backwards a bit and turning for the next target. The missile followed its original target and struck, the fighter exploding.

"Umâ€¦ wowâ€¦ I didn'tâ€¦" Buck was really surprised. He had usually seen pilots guide the missile the whole way until it made contact and they lost connection with the electronic guidance on the missile, just in case the fighter tried to dodge it. Since Elena did a spray and pray to move the fighter the way she wanted it to go, she led the enemy to his own death.

"Huh, you said she's new to this game Eddy?" one of the pilots said. "I thought she wasâ€¦" Buck whispered back.

"You could have fooled me. Maybe we should let Pelkin have a go at her after this mission? Pilot vs. pilot?" the man said.

"I don't know; a fighter pilot vs. a Peli pilot? Wouldn't she be at a disadvantage Jones?" Buck told the man.

"If she's flying like this after two missions, I doubt it. They come



out better and better from the academy don't they?" another pilot said near Elena.

\_I've never been to the academy thoughâ€| \_Elena thought to herself as she got a lock on another fighter just as his wingman came up behind her. The bandit she was locked on fired his cannons as she fired her missile, and she bled her speed and barrel rolled behind the wingman. The missile she fired struck true, and the wingman was the only thing left to kill, and he was right in front of her. He tried to lose her as the surrounding soldiers cheered her on.

"Hey, what difficulty is this? Did you change it or something? Is it still on what we had it last night?" Jones suddenly asked.

"Dunno. Hey missy, pause for a moment" Buck told her. She was about to finish with her final kill, the allies hadn't even gotten a chance to gain locks with her flying. She paused and looked at Buck.

"Go down to difficulty, I wanna see what you're on" he asked.

She went down the menu list and checked difficulty. Everyone was surprised including her. She had forgotten this game could be downgraded for people just starting to play. It was on ace piloting.

Low whistles came from everyone around her, and her eyes were wide. The enemy A.I. didn't seem that responsive to her.

"Ok, finish the mission and we got an idea after" Jones told her and she un-paused and sprayed her cannons. The fighter rolled to dodge the rounds and slipped around a mountain, she following. She realized he'd potentially try and catch her behind the mountain in some form, so she did something insane. She fired a missile that wasn't locked and flew straight forward, and swapped to the missile target guidance. The fighter A.I. realized she broke off and turned to try and make its own attack, but as soon as it turned the missile was right in front of him. The fighter lost its wing and spiraled out of control towards the ground.

"Damn! I gotta remember that one for later!" Jones laughed as a small crowd gathered, watching.

"Ok ok, time to see how well you do against a human player" Pelkin said and slid in next to her. She shifted from her seat closer to her father and Pelkin stuck a crystal into a slot on the front of the console.

"Oh come on man, you're really gonna do that to her? She's running a basic fighter; don't pull that shit on her!" Jones groaned as he pressed start and loaded from the crystal. Elena was a bit confused about the little bluish data storage device, and then realized it was his saved game. He had unlocks available to him. She didn't.

"Time to spank this little girl and send her packing" Pelkin said and a few of the soldiers around them agreed. He chose a modified YSS-1000. Elena had never seen the fighter before, and it looked prototype.

"Shit! You're gonna use that on her? She doesn't even know what that has. You're not even using a real fighter against her!" Jones

objected.

"Oh come on! It's got to be real! Those brass hats just lied their asses off! This qualifies! Now pick your fighter Sergeant!" Pelkin looked at her. She couldn't choose anything else except the basic fighter, as everything was locked to her. She was being forced to fail. She suddenly didn't feel like playing anymore. Her father felt badly for her.

"This is getting a little out of hand guys; you're setting her up to lose. There's no way she can win" Jack said as everyone else groaned as they wanted to see the fight.

"Oh well, better luck next time when you get some unlocks for the game" Pelkin smiled towards Elena.

"Eric you're an asshole. Sheesh" Buck grumbled. Elena didn't put the controller down.

"Start the mission" Elena said.

Everyone froze and shut up. "Seriously?" some were whispering.

"You can't win, there's no way" Jones patted her on the shoulder and shook his head.

"I said start the mission" Elena growled out. She wanted to play, even though she thought she was going to lose. She could at least learn from the whole thing, so she was still winning in a form.

The mission started and Elena pushed her fighter up towards the clouds. She knew she couldn't out fight Pelkin; he had more experience than her and a better fighter, so she had to out think him.

"Not good enough little girl!" Pelkin already had a lock and fired not one, but four Medusa missiles.

"Shit she's already dead" Jones groaned and covered his eyes. Elena fired four flares to compensate. She saw her ammo dispenser of flares drop by four, and realized she only had six left. The medusas veered off and flew in random directions as Elena struggled to get her fighter up to the clouds where she could maybe hide. Pelkin sprayed the air with his 30mm ALA cannons at her, and she barrel rolled to dodge the rounds. Unfortunately for her, the barrel roll slowed her down from getting to the clouds.

"She's still going!" Buck said in surprise, as all the troops in the room watched the dog fight. Jones looked up and saw Elena was still in the game.

"Not good enough bitch" Pelkin growled and followed, getting another lock and was going to fire another four medusas just as Elena bled her speed and came up behind him.

"Ooohhh!" The crowd responded and elbowed each other and pushed by each other to get a better look. "Hell yeah!" some said, rooting Elena on as she tracked Pelkin as he weaved around. She sprayed her cannons at him and suddenly found out when half the rounds hit that the fighter had shields.

"What?" Elena looked surprised and frowned.

"Nice try" Pelkin smirked and looped over the top, firing as he looped with his nose aimed right at her. She was scared now.

"Shit!" Elena cursed and instinctively angled her fighter vertically wing from wing to the ground, the ALA cannons firing right by her, not purchasing any damage. Jones's eyes were wide from the maneuver as she shot forward again. He was faster, but he just bled some speed to get behind.

"Are you sure she's never flown anything other than a Pelican? Jesus, she's giving Pelkin a run for his money! I bet she might win!" Jones said to Buck.

"Hell, I agree, who bets the little missy wins?" Buck asked and people started placing bets on both sides. Elena blushed slightly. She'd never been bet on before to win, and felt awkward these guys were doing it. She didn't like the peer pressure to win, she wanted to do it to prove to herself she could win.

Elena flew higher and higher, dodging cannon fire and trying to keep Pelkin from getting a lock on her so she didn't have to use her flares. He got one more lock and she fired four more flares, dropping her down to two. Just as she reached the clouds, He shot forward, and she figured he'd over shot her. She fired her cannons and he flew out of the way, then turned around and in an insane maneuver, fired four more missiles without a lock. Everyone watched in slow motion as she quickly thought of what to do.

"Oh fuck!" Buck whispered to himself. Elena had a split second to think up an option. Flares wouldn't stop the missiles because they flew out the aft.

The teenager fired her cannons at the missiles and was able to knock down two, but at the same time fired one of her own missiles and flanked left. Her own missile she detonated just ahead of her as the last two medusas gained a lock, and flew through the ensuing fireball, further expanding it and causing some chaos and any infrared sensors, just enough for her to slip up to the clouds and a chance to play cat and mouse. Everyone was really interested now in her maneuvers. So far she had defended extremely well, far better than anyone they had seen so far.

Elena was scared she couldn't keep her game up. She barely knew what Pelkin's fighter could do, and he knew exactly what hers was capable of. He was an experienced fighter pilot with tactics learnt in the academy and knew how to play the game; she was just entering high school and barely played two missions, albeit on the hardest difficulty.

"You're going home in a body bag" Pelkin chuckled and fired into the clouds, but didn't see any damage show up. He saw two red markers show up, usually belonging to the engines of Elena's craft. He smirked and fired his second to last salvo of medusas, and saw them fly true€| into two flares.

"What?" Pelkin gasped as Elena fired a missile from a completely different cloud and swapped to the guidance systems, maneuvering it

as a portable scout, watching for infrared blips. Pelkin pushed the throttle high, and the missile locked. Elena got out of her guidance and flew high out of the clouds, towards the sun.

Pelkin fired one of his own flares, and the missile arced into it, detonating. But he didn't take into account that Elena knew exactly where he was now.

"Oh my god! She's got him!" people were gasping as she dropped her throttle and shot straight towards him like a brick with the sun at her back, firing her cannons as she went. He struggled to aim towards her as she dropped his shields with the last of her missiles. He returned fire, heading straight for her, both of them only having their cannons to fight with.

"Come on! Come on!" everyone was yelling and cheering. Elena was smiling a bit at what she was achieving. Pelkin's fighter was losing armor all over, but hers was being torn apart as well. They were nearly upon each other, and if they collided, it would be a stalemate. She had to finish it.

She disengaged her fuel tank and dropped it, almost on top of Pelkin's fighter, then broke off as he fired.

Everyone held their breath as the fuel tank fell in slow motion and cannon rounds punched into it, igniting the fuel inside and creating a huge fireball. Pelkin could already see his fighter wouldn't survive the hit, so he fired his last salvo of missiles at Elena, already locked. He couldn't dodge the explosion ahead of him that quickly as the damage from the cannons screwed up his stabilizers and flaps, but his missiles drifted below him a few seconds before igniting their fuel supply.

The missiles flew fast, and struck Elena's fighter, who had nothing left. All flares were used, her cannons were empty and all missiles were fired. Her main fuel tank was gone, and she was damaged and already on fire. Just as Pelkin entered the fireball, the missiles struck and tore apart her fighter.

The win screen showed up for Pelkin and lose screen for Elena. She lost by one split second.

#### 4. Adventure Like No Other Pt3

Elena sat there, stunned. The whole crowd was in an uproar as Pelkin stood up and patted her on the shoulder.

"Better luck next time little crate flyer" he almost hissed out to her and walked away, money being swapped between hands as Buck brought his hand to his mouth. Everyone thought she would win, she had shown everyone just how good she was, and she lost because of time. If she just had a few more flares, she could have won.

Elena thought over what just happened as people started to file out. She looked behind her feeling embarrassed and a little sad. What had she done wrong? She had literally adapted to everything that came at her, worked with everything she had available against a superior foe.

"Nice flying" she heard over her shoulder.

"Thanks" she whispered in a disheartened tone, then turned and saw it wasn't her father saying it. Just behind her was the Spartan. The blood drained from her face and her eyes went wide. She tried to squeak something unintelligible, and then looked to her father who was also surprised.

"Didn't expect you in here, I guess you super soldiers can have fun once in a while. Lemme guess, you came in here to watch Bambi and you got this show instead" Buck chuckled. The Master Chief looked over at him and glared.

"Oooohhhh, scary. Look missy, don't be afraid of the big hulking pasty face there, he hates us Hell Jumpers, not you pilots. Here" Buck stood up from his chair and handed Elena twenty credits.

"What? Butâ€¦ I lost?" Elena heard herself say she lost and it struck her hard. She wasn't as good as she thought she was. Elena then realized she did pretty well for her first try. She had nearly won against an ace pilot and she was in her teens, and he had a top of the line fighter while she had in essence a Jalopy. If he hadn't shot those missiles, she would have won. If she had just moved a little faster, it would have been a stalemate, or again, she would have won. She was proud of herself.

"You deserve it, that was better than any movie we could have seen here, and you nearly took our best pilot on board to school with inferior equipment. You may not realize it, but you just earned the respect of everyone that was in this room just from that. If you can play like that, I don't doubt you could probably fly like that too" Buck grinned down at her, and she cracked a small smile. She turned around and saw the Master Chief was already leaving the room.

"We should get some shut eye soon, it got pretty late while you played that" Jack told his daughter. She looked over at his watch.

"It's onlyâ€¦ err, 2000 hours?" She managed to get her voice back.

"And we wake up tomorrow at 0500 for the gym and to get reassigned some new quarters. Don't worry, after today we go into slip space, and you'll have to strive to find something to keep you occupied while we do that" Jack responded with a chuckle.

"I should get going too; it was great seeing that missy, hope to see you here again or in the DFAC!" Buck said and waved goodbye as he walked to the door. Elena waved back and got up. She stretched and turned off the console.

"You lived up to your nickname" Jack said and laughed.

"What? I did? How?" Elena asked, confused.

"The whole time you were fighting, you were trying to use stealth to your advantage, as that was really the only thing you had to survive. You did really well, I'm very impressed" Jack reached out to her and gave her a hug.

"I still lost" she said as he rubbed her back slowly.

"By just one second. If anything, that guy should be thanking you for the good game you put up. He probably doesn't have many competitors if he's that good. Would get boring in slip space if no one wants to play with you." Jack pulled back slowly and looked her in the eye. "Hey, keep your chin up. You should be proud of yourself."

"It's just a game, not real life like my mom says. Games to her are like dead brain time" Elena said and made odd mouth motions and rolled her eyes. Jack laughed as they exited the room.

"Yeah, but she should talk as she sits in front of the TV watching her soaps when she can. She still works as a secretary?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, the company she works for has grown quite a lot, what is itâ€¦ Traxus industries" Elena spoke as they headed for the lift.

"Huh, well I hope she continues to do well" Jack said as they entered. They rode the lift for a bit, then got off and walked to their quarters. Elena got changed with her father outside for privacy, and then he got changed quickly and climbed into bed.

"Dad? Why did you and mom separate?" Elena asked as she sat on the edge of her bed, staring at her toes. Jack sighed thinking of a way to answer her.

"Your mother hated how I wasn't around all the time because of me being in the UNSC, and I didn't like getting your hopes up all the time only to have them crash down when I didn't live up to expectations." Jack stared at the ceiling which was two feet away from him.

"Daddy, you didn't have to do that, we always loved you. We didn't care if you had to shoot off to do some flight somewhere, you always came back and that was what was important. We knew you were military, and that was enough. That's just stupid of mom" Elena said and fell back on her bunk, the bottom bed.

"It's more complicated than that honey, but that's part of it. We bothâ€¦ we both figured I was holding the family back somehow, so I would be a part of your life when you need me, and the restâ€¦ wellâ€¦ apparently I wasn't worth it to herâ€¦" Jack sighed and turned off the small reading light near his head.

"You're worth it to me and Milo dad. We still think you're worth anything in the world." Jack laughed and smiled.

"Thanks sweetheart. Get some sleep. I love you" Jack said softly.

"I love you too daddy" Elena said and got under her covers and turned her light off.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Elena couldn't sleep a wink. Her father's snoring was the worst she's ever heard. It was like someone was turning on a Mack Truck and its starter wouldn't kick in. She tried to push her pillows over her head to block out the noise, but then it seemed he'd snore even louder to

compensate.

She finally snapped and got up, then poked at her father above her. He didn't move.

"Daddyâ€¦" she poked him again. Still snoring.

"Daddy!" She slapped him in the stomach and he shot up and banged his head against the ceiling. "Fuck!" He looked around and held his head. "What? Huh? What's wrong honey?" Jack looked over at her half asleep and confused.

"You're snoring really loudly, I can't sleep, roll over." She made a rolling motion with her index finger. He nodded a bit and apologized, then rolled over and went back to bed, still sore from his head banging the ceiling. She sighed and went back to sleep.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Jack was snoring again. Elena was so tired; she couldn't get any shut eye. She couldn't wait until she got her own quarters, just to herself. She had to survive through the night though before that could happen. She got out of her bed and tried to roll her father over, but he was in a position above her head that made it difficult to push, and his weight was too much for her small muscles.

She sat down and thought. She remembered seeing a pair of noise canceling ear muffs in one of the duffels, and she began digging through it. She pulled them out and put them on her head, then got back into bed. She couldn't hear anything now. She quickly fell asleep with nothing to keep her up.

\*\*[0500 hours, June 13\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2542, Marathon Cruiser \*\*\_\*\*Honor Bound\*\*\_\*\*, Deck 72, Room Q149-B2]\*\*

Jack woke up from his watch beeping its alarm. He slowly got up and slid off the top and let his feet touch the ground. He looked around and saw his duffel bag, and started digging through it for a new pair of clothes. It was still dark inside, but he could see the duffel was rifled through by someone. He turned around and looked at his daughter sleeping peacefully in her bedâ€¦ with a pair of ear muffs on her head.

Jack looked confused, and walked over to wake her gently. She tried to push his hand away and go back to sleep, so he shook her a bit more. She finally woke up and looked at him with sleep deprived eyes.

"Hey, wake up. What's this?" He made hand motions to his head in emphasis to her. She watched his hand motions carefully, trying to deduce what he was saying.

"YOU SNORE!" she yelled as she couldn't hear herself talk, then tried to roll over and go back to sleep. Jack looked dumbfounded at her. Did he really snore that loudly? He shook her gently again.

"I wanna sleep!" she whined as he took the ear muffs off her head, and her hands shot up to stop him.

"Nooooâ€¦ daddyâ€¦" she whined again, and he finished taking them

away as she shot up to look at him annoyed.

"It's 0500 and we are going to the gym. Your body will wear down its muscles out here in space faster than you think, so to get them back to working well, we are going to exercise. Don't worry, I'm not expecting you to do PT and do fifty pushups like a marine, but I do expect you to make some effort to keep yourself in shape. You grab some clothes and I'll check the terminal for a response to our quarter's requests. We shouldn't have any problems. Then we head up and pick up your things, I'll take you to your new quarters and I'll quickly go take a shower while you do the same. You should be allowed to wear civilian clothes on board since you're a contracted." Elena shook her head and rubbed her eyes to wake herself up some more and breathed deep. She was still tired, and wanted her beauty sleep.

She got up and stumbled her way to her duffel, not quite having her center of balance under control, her brain not quite awake yet. Jack turned on the terminal and typed in his login, then added in his authenticator code. The terminal swapped to the personnel net and had one email noted for him. He opened it while Elena grabbed her clothes.

\*\*A.I. DARWIN: RESPONSE TO REQUEST OF SPECIAL QUARTERS SUBMITTED 1400 HOURS, 06/12/2542 SENT TO D72-Q149-B2 TO FLIGHT LIEUTENANT JACK GRIPEN UNSC AIR FORCE BRANCH SN 24689-496017 AP. START RESPONSE:\*\*

\*\*REQUEST ACCEPTED. SPECIAL QUARTERS HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED UNDER ORDERS FROM [REDACTED.] MUST USE STANDARD QUARTERS FOR OFFICERS ON BOARD UNSC MARATHON CRUISER \_HONOR BOUND\_ FOR ONE OF SAID PERSONNEL. QUARTERS ASSIGNED ARE: D2-Q030-B1-S AND D90-Q246-B1. END RESPONSE\*\*

Jack's heart sunk. The quarters they were assigned were on different decks, and in different parts of the ship.

"Fuck" Jack whispered, but Elena heard him.

"Something wrong?" Elena asked him. He sighed and looked up at her with a pained expression.

"Weâ€¦ have a problemâ€¦ we got authorized for the expanded quarters we asked for you" Jack told her.

"Wait, I thought that was what we wanted?" Elena asked, looking incredibly confused. Jack shook his head softly.

"Where are we assigned?" She said, as worry strung through her voice.

"D2-Q030 and D90-Q246. Q030 if I remember correctly is near the bridge somewhere, and Q246 isâ€¦ wellâ€¦ it's near the flight deck for hangar nine. I am assigned Q246, and you are assigned Q030. We're not anywhere near each other. It's going to be a little difficult to keep track of each otherâ€¦" Jack groaned out loud after he told her.

"Well, I could always stay put inside until you come for me..." Elena told him, hoping that would answer the problem.



"Not exactly. You'll have to find your way on your own to the flight deck eventually. I don't have authorization to go up near the bridge unless summoned by the brass or there's a briefing, which is doubtful. You don't just walk onto Deck 2, regardless of your rank. You tend to request authorization, you're given it by the ship A.I. or are escorted up, and then you do whatever it is you need to do with the Captain. You, however, can come and go as you please, which is a little confusing. I wonder ifâ€¦" Jack thought for a moment.

"Wonder if what? We can ask to change it?" the teenager asked, her black hair a mess from her tossing and turning.

"No, we can't change it, they'd just laugh and tell us to shut up and get to work, well, me anyways. Youâ€¦ ok, here's what's gonna happen. We're gonna go to get some breakfast, and then we'll go to the gym, do some exercises, come back and grab our gear, we'll take you up to your quarters, then you'll take a shower and I'll go down to the group showers and do the same. I'll grab my gear and I'll drop it off at my quarters, then it's pretty much open game. I may have to go to talk to someone for a bit, but that won't take too long I hope" Jack told her his plan.

"I can't come with you?" she asked with a hint of worry in her tone.

"You'll be fine honey, I'll only be gone for maybe an hour, and it's not a huge amount of time. I just want a little information. I'll pick you up afterwards and then we'll go down to the flight deck and you can use the sim pod for a little training if you want, then, we can goof off while we go into slip space. Deal?" Jack told her.

"Well, okâ€¦ I guess." Elena put down her things and got changed into some basic clothes. She then zipped up her duffel and watched her father do the same, and then they both walked out. Jack escorted her to the lift, and they both walked in. The lift went down for some time, until it slowed to a stop at deck 74.

They noticed the whole place was filled with personnel, and a line at the counter.

"Wow, this place is packed" Jack said as they walked up to the back of the line. They each grabbed a tray and followed slowly.

"Hey there! Sleep well?" a voice said behind Elena. She turned around and noticed it was Buck.

"Not exactlyâ€¦" she grumbled and looked at her father.

"Ah, lemme guess, snoring? Yeah, I used to be bunked with this one guy back when I was in boot for ODS training. He snored so loud the whole building could hear him. It got so bad they had to require him to get those breathing strips you put on your nose. Before he got those though, in order to get him to stop, we finally got fed up and just pushed him off his bunk. It was somewhat gratifying to hear the snoring then thump! And we went back to sleep after that" Buck laughed while telling her.

Elena giggled and followed the line, Buck right behind her. She

finally reached the beverage counter and picked up a carton of milk. Buck did the same, and they walked up to the next counter. A cook leaned out and dropped a plate of eggs and bacon and hash browns on her tray.

"Hey, come here" the cook motioned for her to come a bit closer. She leaned in a bit, wondering what he wanted.

"Weren't you the one who gave that ass hat a one four flying lesson last night? Good on ya girlie. Wish you were a perma on this thing. Waste of a fighter pilot you bein a Peli jumper and all that. You take care now ya hear?" the cook let her move forward after saying his piece, she thanking him and continuing forward.

"Everybody heard about that? It was just a game, nothing real" Elena said as she grabbed a small bowl of fruit with plastic wrap over it.

"You'd be surprised how many found out about that afterwards. To most of the people on board, Pelkin is an ass, but a good pilot, so as long as he doesn't piss people off when he's on duty, nobody cares. We were all hoping you would have knocked him down a peg last night, but you still did good." Buck grabbed an orange and Jack grabbed a pack of toast and jam. "Fresh fruit! Hmm, you don't get much of that on trips more than a week. Things are looking up!" Buck said behind her.

"Let's sit over there" Jack said as he motioned to a corner table. Buck asked if he could sit with them, and Elena nodded. Just as they got near the table, they noticed it was the Master Chief sitting in the corner. He looked up at them, no emotion showing on his face, a mask of stone. He especially looked right at Elena, and despite what Buck said to her the other night, she was still a little frightened.

"Ah, figures. We'll find another table, no worries missy" Buck said and looked around for spots.

"Hey! Hey! Fly girl! Over here!" a wave was seen in the distance and Elena noticed it was Jones from the other night. "Come sit with us! We saved you some seats!" He yelled out to them. Elena looked at the two men with her and they both nodded in the same direction. Elena walked over and stood there meekly, a little embarrassed they remembered her.

"Three seats for you guys. Don't worry, Erin's not here. Come on, have a seat" Jones motioned to the seats as he took a bite of his bacon.

"Thanks!" she said with a smile and sat down next to him, her father sitting right beside her and Buck sitting across. The table looked like it was full of fighter pilots as well as some ODSTs, and Buck seemed completely at home.

"So, we heard you got assigned up on deck 2. Special quarters. Must have impressed someone getting that" one of the pilots, she thought his name was C. Jennings, told her.

"Well, umâ€¦" Elena couldn't figure out how to explain why she got them.

"She's a civie so she has special needs. They aren't used to the group bathrooms like we are" Jack explained.

"Ah. Yeah, the women here are a little touchy on that subject. Still, they volunteered, they have to deal with it. Being a civie has its advantages it seems in some cases" Buck said as he took a bite of his hash browns.

"There's definitely a morale boost when they do go to the bathrooms" a pilot said.

"I'll say!" another pilot chimed in, and everyone laughed except Jack and Elena.

"It's not like you guys could get it up anyways, you stick riders" a female voice walking by said.

"Oh come on! As if we could to your fat ass!" Jones laughed and the woman nearby, wearing what looked to be a tank top with dog tags and cargo pants, smiled back. She was wearing brown boots Elena noticed. She must be a Pelican pilot or another fighter pilot.

"You see? That's what happens when you fly a Long Sword, the stick rides so far up your ass the pain makes you see in double vision!" She responded and everyone ooohed at the burn. Jones ceded defeat with a smile as the woman sat down at a table right next to them.

"That woman is Lieutenant Farrah, she's a Peli support pilot" Jones explained to Elena. She nodded but was still confused as she didn't know what a Peli support was.

"Support means she flies gunship support for ground forces most of the time. Her Pelican is equipped with weaponry" Jack whispered down to her as he wiped jam on his toast.

"Ah" Elena said and looked behind her, and saw Farrah lean back and smile at her.

"Another girl here, thank god, this sausage fest was getting out of hand, about time we got another competent pilot" she snickered and elbowed Elena playfully in the side, and she giggled in response.

"I'm Dâ€| Jack's Co-pilot though, so not really" Elena responded, feeling a little lower than the rest of the people she was sitting with. Everyone just laughed and looked around. Jack cleared his throat and looked at her.

"Co-pilots ARE pilots missy. You act like you're just out of flight training" Jones chuckled and looked around at the rest of the table.

"Y-yeah, I knew that! Just, it's not my Pelican, so I don't really consider myself a full pilot, that's what I meant." Elena tried to fix what she just said, trying to keep people from getting suspicious.

"Well if you fly for real like you did last night, you'll probably

have your own really soon, trust me" Farrah said over her shoulder as she took a bite of an apple slice.

"As long as you can fit in it of course. Fat ass behind us has to be buttered up to slide through the-" Jones tried to finish while laughing as Farrah got her arm around his neck and gave him a noogey, laughing the whole time. Everyone laughed hard.

"But seriously though, you want her to watch out for the ground pounders, if she's not there, you mud thumpers would be in a world of hurt otherwise, don't deny it" Jones said as Farrah stopped her playful assault.

"Hey, we do alright without you fly boys, and girls, having to watch our backs all the time. Hell, we have something you guys don't. It's called cover. But it's still much appreciated all the same when you're up there" Buck grinned and pointed his fork at Jones.

"We have cover! They're called clouds dumb ass!" Jones laughed.

"Not in space you don't! Show me a cloud up in space! And they aren't physical! You can't hide behind them and expect them to protect you from a round!" Buck argued while laughing. Both Jones and Buck started retorting back and forth as Elena looked behind her towards the table in the corner.

The Spartan was finishing his food and suddenly looked right at her. He had a somewhat pained expression on his face, as if he thought of a sad memory, but it quickly faded and turned to stone again. After seeing that face, she suddenly wasn't as afraid of him anymore. Whatever, or whoever, caused him to think back and frown must have been a memorable experience to make a Spartan feel sad she thought.

Elena finished her breakfast and saw that her father was long since done, so they bid their farewells and went down to the gym.

"Are you sure you want to exercise in that? Do you have any sweats?" Jack asked her. She looked down at her attire and didn't notice anything odd.

"Well, as long as you're ok with it" he said and they walked through the green door to the gym. The entire room was covered with exercise machines for all parts of the body. Multiple treadmills, exercise bikes and weight lifting tables were set about, as well as a small boxing ring and punching bags. There were only two cable machines it seemed. There was an area of the gym that seemed to be reserved for high gravity however, and Elena didn't seem interested.

"Let's go do the treadmill; it's the easiest to work with for you I think, and then a few small weights, some pull ups and pushups." Jack walked over to the first treadmill and jumped on it, and set it to a speed that he felt was right for him. Elena followed suit and set her treadmill to what she enjoyed, a light jog.

"So, I hear Milo is becoming a bit of rebel. He's being ok to your mother right?" her father asked her to start up some small talk.

"Eh, he's pretty mean to people most of the time. He's changed quite

a bit. He swears a lot, he listens to loud music and he disobeys mom whenever he can" Elena told him as she started to feel a light burn in her leg muscles.

"Hmmm, I'll have to have a talk with him later; he shouldn't do that to his mother. He's got to get set straight, there's no need for a guy like that in the world. If he thinks being like he is is cool, he's got another thing coming when he can't get a decent job." Jack increased his speed by two notches.

"What about you? Can't wait till you are in you know where?" he grinned at her and wiggled his eyebrows.

"Well, it's gonna be just like where I was, just I'll be older, you know? More classes and all" Elena immediately shut up when she saw the doors open and in walked the Master Chief. He nodded in her direction then walked into the high gravity zone and towards the weights.

"What's wrong? Oh. I see. Don't worry, he won't hurt you" he said and turned his treadmill off, rolling back a tiny bit and moving to a weight table. Elena followed his example and turned hers off as well, but instead did some stretches. She did a leg split on the ground and pulled toward her toes, then stood up and took some small weights, each five pounds. Jack chuckled.

"What? I'm not like you, Jack. I'm not very strong" she told him.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. Just five pounds won't do much. Try picking up the ten pounders" he said as he had two fifty pounders and was doing Triceps Dumbbell Extensions.

Elena heard in the corner the weights being pushed onto the bench bar for the Spartan, then heard it lift. She happened to look around the corner and saw what looked to be this mass of muscle doing bench lifts. She gawked at the amount of weight he was pushing up and down, and he was doing lying barbell extensions towards his face.

"What, you interested?" Jack asked jokingly.

"What? No! Worried about him more like it. Besidesâ€¦ I like someone at sch- at home" she corrected herself.

"Oh yeah! Andy! How is he doing? And what's your best friend's name, Amber?" her father asked as he swapped to kick backs on a bench.

"Yup, she's doing well, she was gonna take her vacation at the beach, get a sun tan she said" Elena told him as she continued curling the ten pounders. Her arms were starting to hurt.

"Didâ€¦ did you want to go with her?" Jack asked her with a grin.

"Not really. I'd much ratherâ€¦ errâ€¦ um, finish this job." She was worried the Spartan could hear her.

"I don't know if he can hear us way over her if we're low key. You don't have to worry" Jack told her, but she wasn't sure. She thought she could see out of the corner of her eye him glance in their

direction as they said that, but when she turned her head he was staring at the barbell he was doing sets with.

"Hey, want to try doing what he's doing?" Jack asked his daughter.

"What? I could never lift that much!" she exclaimed.

"No no no, you would do a much lower amount in normal gravity. Don't worry, I'll spot you." Jack laughed and motioned for her to lie down on a bench. She didn't know what to do while he placed some weights on the bar, and it looked like about fifty pounds total.

"Try that, I'll keep my hands ready if you can't" he told her. She picked it up off of its rack and immediately felt how heavy it was. She did a few sets then told him she was done.

"Ok ok, guess you're still not ready for it" he told her.

"Ouch, my arms are sore" she whined and rubbed her biceps as she sat up.

They both swapped to pushups and sit ups, and then Jack helped his daughter set a bar to do pull ups while he worked on a cable machine.

"Well, I think we're pretty much done now, it's been an hour already. Let's head up to our room and get our gear, then transfer you and take a shower. I'll shoot down quick to get a shower and drop my stuff off in my quarters then zoom back up and grab you for the sim pod. Then we can test your leet skillz" Jack told her and made little flying gestures in the air. She agreed and followed him out, taking a quick glance behind her and seeing the Spartan had stopped his sets and was sitting with a towel wiping his face. She couldn't really tell if it was the trick of the light, but he looked deeply sad. He looked up suddenly and saw her staring and she felt sorry for him, before she quickly turned away and ran out.

"That Spartan seems sad" Elena told her father as they walked down the hall past some technicians heading in another direction.

"How so?" he asked back as he slid by an engineer moving a cart down the hallway.

"I don't know. Like, he keeps making these sad faces when he thinks no one is looking, like he's remembering something from the past, or thinking about something in the future maybe?"

Jack shrugged and they continued to walk on towards the lift. As the lift opened up, they saw the two marines from the day before, laughing about something. They looked at Elena as they both got in and turned around. She could feel their eyes roaming her, and she thought it was creepy. They didn't really know that she was under age though, and she didn't want them to find out. She heard one of them whisper something and then the other stifle a laugh.

"Maybe she's Mexican orâ€¦ she could be Thai, you never know" one of the marines whispered. Jack flipped around and stared at them.

"Would you mind sharing with the rest of us what you are saying and who you are referring to private?" Jack said as he leveled a cold stare at them.

"Sir! I was confused as to the nationality of the woman next to you sir! I have hardly been to Earth, and I was wondering from which country she might have been from!" Both marines snapped to.

"How do you know she's even from Earth private? And why do you even care? You can always ask nicely and in a civilized manner instead of whispering behind them and giggling like little pricks that just had their balls drop and are staring at every girl's ass they can" Jack growled out.

"Sir! Apologies and no offense intended sir!" Both marines saluted and looked at Elena, who was very annoyed and did not like how they were originally treating her. Both of them didn't know what her fake rank was either.

"You'd do better to treat a higher rank with more respect, private" Elena suddenly said and Jack looked at her.

"I will endeavor to do that from now on ma'am! I mean I do that always ma'am!" The marines didn't know what else to say.

"If we find out about anymore chatter that doesn't include her in a more respectful tone, you two jarheads will be the first ones we track down, you understand?" Jack growled towards them, and the lift doors opened.

"Yes sir! Sorry sir!" Both marines stood there.

"Isn't this your deck marines?" Elena said, noticing the number wasn't the one they wanted.

"Yes ma'am!" They both walked out briskly, and Elena and Jack watched as the doors closed.

"That was pretty good, you got into that" Jack punched her playfully.

"Mom says women shouldn't be treated like a piece of meat, and frankly I don't want to be treated as such. It feltâ€¦ dirtyâ€¦" she shivered.

"I completely agree. Of course I'm your father so if anyone did that to you I'd have to kill them and incinerate the body to hide the evidence" he said matter of factly.

She looked up at him in surprise and punched him playfully. He chuckled and tousled her hair.

"You wouldn't do that to Andy would you?" she asked.

"Only if you don't like it. It's a little complicated when it's done by someone you care about" he told her.

The doors opened again, and they walked out and down the hall. They continued back to their quarters and grabbed their things, then went back to the lift.

The lift went up for some time, until it slowed to a stop at deck 12. The doors opened, and standing in the way was a man they hadn't seen in years. Looking right at them was Dr. Wright. His hair had grown a few more grey patches, but he still wore his suit, now covered with what looked to be halfway between a lab coat and a trench coat.

Elena froze. She remembered him vaguely from when she was six. She hoped he didn't remember her, or at least be suspicious that she was older and on board the ship.

"Hello" Dr. Wright said with a grin and walked in, then turned around and pressed deck 2. Her heart jumped into her throat. He was going to the same deck. Elena looked up at her father, who returned the worried gaze.

"Are you two both ready to enter slip space? It's an amazing experience" Wright said, aiming his words at the two of them as he watched the doors of the lift.

"Um, yes sir" Jack responded. Wright looked over his shoulder and looked Jack over, then looked at Elena. She did her best to stand ramrod straight.

"My god! I do believe I recognize you!" the Doctor said as he looked at them, and both of them immediately were scared out of their minds.

"Look sir, I can expl-" Jack tried to say.

"I remember you some seven years ago! I met you in that shop! It's good to see you again! You had a little girl with you if I'm not mistaken? How is she?" the doctor grinned ear to ear and put his hand out to shake Jack's hand. Elena realized that he might not know she was that little girl.

"She'sâ€¦ she is doing fine sir, she has just graduated middle school" Jack said, then realized that might be too much information he gave out. If it was, the doctor didn't notice it.

"Good to hear! Is she still into aircraft might I inquire?" Daveth asked, as he seemed to pay no heed to Elena nearby.

"You can say that again sir. Can't keep her feet on the ground so to speak" Jack chuckled.

"Ah, she did seem a smart one, does well in school yes?" he enquired further about Elena's education.

"Straight As, every time it seems."

"Good! Good. I can see her going far, that one. I was wondering, I am doing a small study in the future; would you be willing to allow me to talk to her for a bit? I wanted to get a tiny bit of information from her, involving her love of aircraft. I can't explain much more than that I'm afraid, as you can see I am obviously not on board this ship for a pleasure cruise." The Doctor seemed to have an odd grin on his face, but Elena couldn't tell if it was the light of the hallway they were in or if it was real.



"Well, Iâ€¦ she'd have to be the one who accepted, and it's only if nothing bad will happen to herâ€¦ I mean, you just said you were-" Jack was interrupted by the doctor.

"I assure you nothing bad will happen my boy, I just wish to talk, and we've done it with many children all over. As you recall, I am a doctor of psychology and brain sciences. Surely you cannot see anything harmful coming from simple words from an old man could you?" Wright smiled warmly towards him.

"I'll have to ask her, but, I'm sure it would be alright. I wonder if she remembers you from so long ago." Jack continued, trying to keep Elena from being noticed.

"I wonder that myself, but oh, I believe I am keeping you from going where you are neededâ€¦ em, I see you are helping your, err, Co-pilot yes?" Daveth asked him.

"Err, yes! Yes, she's gained her quarters for the slip space trip to Reach." Jack and Wright looked at her and she felt extremely awkward.

"Which room is that might I ask?" Daveth said.

"Umâ€¦ 030" Elena said, a little startled she was put on the spot.

"Ah! Right next to mine! I am 031. Splendid! Splendid! And you fly with Mr. Gripen yes? What would be your favorite part about the job missâ€¦errâ€¦" he pushed his glass down a bit and checked her chest for any tag with her name on it.

"Esprit" she said, feeling very tense.

"Ah, Ms. Esprit, what is your favorite part of the job might I ask?"

"Well, you see, I'm a contracted civilian, so-" she tried to explain to him what her father had told her to say.

"Ah yes, I saw that on the pilot list the other day. I was looking at the Pelican lists for whom would take me down to Reach when we arrive. I heard a few good things about you Mr. Gripen. I hope you will be willing to take me safely to the surface when we arrive?" Wright asked.

"It'd be an honor sir" Jack nodded to him.

"Splendid! So, Ms. Esprit, I know you are a civilian but back to my question" he said, reaching out and taking her hand in his and putting his right hand on top gently, staring into her eyes.

"Um, well, the feeling of flying I guess. You're not on the ground, not tethered to your feet I think, more to your aircraft, or spacecraft as the case maybe" Elena spoke truthfully.

"Ah, the feeling of flight, yes, yes, and it is true, your craft is like your body, its armor your skin, the engines your heart, and your thrusters your feet? Carrying you wherever you wish to go?" Wright

asked.

"Yes, that's exactly what I think!" Elena told him, smiling.

"Aha! Always good to find something you find enjoyable in your daily duties. Very good indeed! And you are not of the military yes? Not UNSC? Have you ever thought of joining? I must tell you, the little crowd in the entertainment room, with you playing that game, that flying game, I happened to see it as I was getting a book. I must say, if you have not thought of joining the academy, you should indeed!" Wright said while softly shaking her hand up and down, then letting go and pushing his glasses back up his nose.

Elena was caught off guard by what he said, and was extremely surprised. He saw her playing?

"Well, that was just a game, that isn't real life, there's so many-" she tried to explain the differences between flying in real life and the game but it was difficult for her to find the words.

"Variables? Wind velocity? Tack handling? How the aircraft feels? Yes, I know I know; so many different variables you have to account for that change how you fly. I wonder, though, you were able to handle the combat of that game quite well, quite well indeed. What was going through your head when you did all that, that aerial dancing?" Wright asked her and waved his hand around in the air.

"Aerial dancing?" Elena said a bit perplexed.

"Yes, yes, I figured with all that dodging and weaving you knew how to dance as well as fly my girl!" He let out a hearty chuckle.

"Iâ€¦ I never really took dancing lessons, I don't really know how to dance, I justâ€¦ I just figured it was the best way to keep surviving you know? I didn't have anything else but my wits to stop him so I did what I could to keep him from shooting me, like I guess anyone else would do" she told him, trying to find the words to express why she did what she did.

"Ah, my mistake, my apologies. It was still very beautiful however. You should think about learning to dance, it does the body some good I should say. Very good indeed. It might even help with your path to keep your feet off the ground my dear" Wright pressed his fingers down gently on her hand that he was holding up with his left, bouncing them softly a few times then letting go completely.

Elena smiled and nodded, telling him she would look into it.

"Good! Good, ah, but you did say you were heading to your quarters and you must be a busy girl! You as well! Ah, where are my manners? Would you allow me to help you with your baggage?" he asked, looking at both of them.

"Oh, I don't think-" Elena tried to object. "They're pretty heavy duffels, we wouldn't want to hurt you with them" Jack interrupted.

"Ah, yes. Thank you for considering that, I had not factored in weight for them. Some of these things, they slip my old mind they do.

Well, I shall let you get settled in. Mayhap I could interest you in joining me for breakfast tomorrow however? It does get a bit dull inside this blasted metal boat doesn't it? A bit of company would be enjoyable to talk to" Daveth asked.

"Wha, well, I-" Elena looked to her father.

"Oh he can come as well if he wishes, by all means! The more the merrier you bring my dear!" he said to her. Elena was bewildered. She was being invited, not her father, though she could bring him along. She didn't think she was very special. Wouldn't he rather invite her father directly and let her tag along?

"Well, sure, alright, I'll come" she said, hoping her father would come for back up. Her father looked amused.

"Splendid! Splendid! Until tomorrow my dear, I shall see you in the morning! Come to the officers dining hall, I shall be waiting with baited breath for another chance to talk with you!" He said and did a small salute as they waved goodbye.

"That went better than expected. I was worried for a minute" Elena whispered to Jack as they made their way to her quarters.

"Key code is 7642, then swipe your thumb and let it read your eye" Jack told her. She typed the number in and pushed her thumb down, then looked into the iris sensor.

"Welcome back Ms. Esprit" a female voice said and the door unlocked. Elena seemed shocked by the voice, and looked up at her father.

"They didn't have that the last time I was on a Marathon. That's new. Let's get you situated."

They walked in and immediately Elena noticed the bed was much larger than the room they were previously in. It was queen sized, with a window outside and an armored panel on hydraulics hanging just over it. A desk was in the right front corner in a niche, with a light hanging over it and a terminal on top. A locker sat next to it near the door that led to the bathroom. In the right furthest corner near the bed, a potted plant with what looked to be a fern sat, and in front of it was a metal chair. To the left of the bed was a nightstand, and next to that was a metal dresser.

"Wow, it's not exactly my room, but it's still decent. This is where an officer stays?" Elena asked as she dropped her duffel bag on the ground and slid it forward with her foot slowly.

"Yup, though the Captain's Loft is much larger. There are also cabins which are about the same as the Captain's Loft which are set aside for higher ranks such as colonels or admirals visiting, but I've never been in one" he told her as he helped her get one duffel under the bed.

"You never know, you could make it to Admiral one day daddy" Elena cocked her head slightly and giggled.

"Actually, I'd be trying to make it to General sweetie. There are no Admirals in the Air Force." Jack scratched his head and looked around

to make sure everything was in order, as if waiting for something to pop out that he needed to fix to make sure his daughter's stay in here was decent.

"Oh, well you never know, you may make it to General someday" She smiled and he couldn't help but smile back.

"I dunno, you may overshoot me with those flying skills of yours" He playfully punched her arm.

"Me? No, I'm not that good, am I? I haven't even flown yet, you did all the work in the Pelican" she giggled.

"You know? You're right. Hmmmâ€¦ you know we still have to go to the sim pod. See how well you really fly"he grinned from ear to ear and wiggled his eyebrows.

"Whaâ€¦ really? Butâ€¦ could I really do that?" she asked.

"Always have your pass with you, and it'll get you from point A to point B. Point B will usually be the flight deck. I don't have to be with you each time; you can start it up if I'm ever not with you. No one should care if you want to keep your skills up while we're in slip space. Between those two points, A being your quarters of course, you should be allowed to go to the gym, or the entertainment room or DFAC. Sound good?" Jack asked.

"Well, I still wanna stick with you, butâ€¦ I guess I could do that if I really had to" she looked a little sheepish as she talked.

"Well, there will be some times where I just need to go do something with the techs or talk with the higher echelon in some form, whether they call me to the bridge or some such. During those times, it should open you up to a lot of stuff" Jack said.

"Umâ€¦ ok, I guess" she said.

"First, shower. By the way, you don't need your code anymore for your door. It stops working after you use it anyways; it's there to allow first entrance. It'll now use your thumb print and your iris scan. Should give you some privacy." Elena nodded in acknowledgement.

Elena ran to grab a towel. She went into her small bathroom while her father shot out and went down to his own quarters, then to the bathroom. She was quick, as she remembered the water shut off after 5 minutes, and was able to get her long hair washed sufficiently. She took a comb and brushed out her hair to keep it from getting tangled, then looked around for a blow dryer.

"Oh noâ€¦" she whispered and looked around. She wrapped the towel around herself and walked out to her duffel to pull out a portable dryer she brought just in case.

"There's a plug somewhere in there right?" she mumbled to herself.

She walked into her cramped bathroom. Elena looked around and noticed a small block with a slit in the top for tissues, and felt behind it.

The block moved when she pressed her hand behind and slid the object forward to find a small one plug slot.

"Bingo. Found it" Elena sighed in relief. She continued drying her hair and combing it, bending over and letting her black hair fall over her head. Once she had it dry and brushed, which happened to take at least ten minutes of continuous drying, she put on her training bra and prepped her panties with a pad, then put them on and threw her striped T-shirt on and transforming cargo pants.

She walked out to sit down on her bed and put her socks on while she waited for her father to come back and get her. The door suddenly made a ring sound and she walked over to it. Someone wanted to be let in. She looked at the controls and frowned. She ran her thumb over the sensor and all it did was turn on a monitor to let her know who was at the door, which she already knew was her father. His face showed up slightly distorted from the angle of the camera watching, and she tried looking for an open button.

Jack looked up at the camera and wrote something on his data pad, then held it up to the camera. He wrote: PRESS THE YELLOW BUTTON THEN THE GREEN BUTTON. She looked down and saw the yellow button was flashing, so she pressed it and the green button started flashing. She pressed that one as well and the door hissed open. Jack walked in clean with his hair still slightly damp.

"Hmmm, should have remembered to show you how to open the door on this side, it's a little different from coming in. You figure out how to use the toilet yet?" he asked her.

"Is it three sea shells?" she winced.

"What? No. Why would it be three sea shells? The button for it isn't on the toilet itself, it's usually a screwy sensor that doesn't usually work from what I've heard, so there was a button installed at the bathroom door just in case. What do sea shells have to do with a toilet?" he told her, looking confused when she asked about the shells.

"Never mind, don't worry about it" she waved the question off.

"Alright, ready to go check out the sim pod?" Jack asked. She nodded.

Both of them exited from her room and headed for the lift. They descended down to deck 90 and walked out and down the hallway. They could hear machines running in the background behind the walls, and when looked into the open door on her right, she saw what looked to be a machine shop.

"They make parts here?" Elena asked in disbelief.

"Of course! There's been a machine shop on board every large naval vessel since the 20th century. They make just about anything they need with spare materials, it's easier than just stocking spare parts as that might be the part that doesn't break. If they can't make it, then it's usually such a big problem they will have to pull into dry dock to replace it, and it puts the ship out of commission for a while. They can even patch large hull breaches by themselves." Elena

looked into the room and noticed someone was drilling holes into some piping and pushing wiring through the holes.

"Come on, let's get in the next room, that's where the sim pod is" Jack said and nudged her. Elena followed and entered the next room, which seemed to be openly attached to the flight deck of the hangar.

"Hey Jack, what's up?" a maintenance tech walked up and put down a tool.

"Nothing much Zeks, how's everything here?" he asked.

"Nothing to do while we're in slip. We're just doing minor oil changes and cleaning the place really" the man said.

"Ah, Elena, this is Ezekiel Hadsville. He's in charge of the maintenance crew for the Pelicans. If he can't fix it, your bird is toast" he chuckled.

"Only if it's a Pelican. The Long Swords I could work on and it'd still be toast" Ezekiel grinned.

"Heh. Hey, is the pod available? Elena wants to keep her skills up a bit" Jack motioned back to the other room, which Elena now figured was an office of sorts.

"Yeah, it's functional, why? Getting a little antsy not flying girlie?" Ezekiel asked her.

"Yeah, just, don't wanna get rusty that's all" she told him, trying to sound professional.

"Well, it was previously set for some Cadet transferring from a naval base somewhere on the east coast of the U.S. so you might have to swap it from whatever he was using to pelican. See you guys around" he told them and walked back the way he came.

"Ok, let's get you in the thing" Jack opened the door of the pod and Elena slid in. The controls she saw were two joy sticks, a throttle, and multiple black panels in front of her. She didn't see any buttons.

"What do I do?" she asked him.

"Turn it on" he motioned towards the small green button near the seat. As if on cue, the pod started up and buttons lit up on the black panels.

"Oh it changes according to what craft you fly" Elena suddenly understood what they were for. She was in a touch panel pod.

"Hmm, looks like he was right. Whoever the cadet was, he had it set to a Long Sword, GA-TL1 model. We should change it to a Pelican. Here, touch this" Jack said and pushed another panel that wasn't touch sensitive. He rotated through the list of craft, some even being escape pods, and finally to pelican.

"Will I get to do the Long Sword later?" she whispered to him.

"If you want, but right now let's get you flying with the craft you came in on. It'll take you some time to go through the assorted missions. I'd say a good portion of the week just to complete the basic training" Jack chuckled and started the simulation.

"It takes that long to get used to a craft?" She asked.

"Well, it might take you less time, you being an ace pilot and all" he joked. She grinned and started her mission. It was a basic starter mission, involving flying from point A to point B without any problems. She noticed there was also a flight wheel installed as well.

She took a hold of her flight joystick and put her hand on the touch panel, starting the pelican up and going through her preflight, then continued towards her actual flight, just like how she saw her father do. She put her hand on her throttle and eased into it while going up, then changed her thrust vectors and flew off towards the position the sim wanted her to go. She didn't have to do any communication chatter over the radio, since it wasn't real. When she landed, the mission was complete.

"It felt so real" she spoke and looked over at her father. He nodded in agreement.

"The chair you're in tries to simulate the feel of actually flying, changing its vibrations or bumps where it needs to show you how your craft is flying or if you hit bad weather or turbulence. It needs to test how well you can adapt to different conditions. The average pilot needs 40 hours to be considered a functional pilot. Twenty of those hours need to be with an instructor, but frankly, you've already proven you can handle it from what I've seen, though they are still needed. The last twenty is solo or with instruction. After that it's just an oral exam, which I know you can recite by heart, and a written exam, which again you can do blind folded."

Jack heard footsteps behind him and noticed two men walk up to him, one of which was the Captain of the ship. Elena didn't say anything and just sat in the pod.

"Lieutenant Jack Gripen" the captain said.

"Captain Markovic sir!" Jack snapped at attention and saluted. The maintenance crew didn't even see him enter and suddenly heard Jack yell out his name. He suddenly heard a "CAPTAIN ON DECK!" come from everyone.

"At ease" the captain ordered. Jack stood at casual attention.

"I have a bit of a problem Lieutenant" the captain started. Elena was scared. He must have found out about her being on board and they might double back and drop her off, probably court martial her father. She was incredibly worried and quickly tried to think up different ways to fix it.

"I have a cadet who hasn't finished his code training and I need someone to bring him up to speed before he gets to Reach." Jack was in stunned silence for a moment.

"Is that going to be difficult for you Lieutenant?" the Captain

asked.

"No sir! Just I'm not a standardized instructor sir! I don't know what he has already been trained in, and I don't believe-" Jack tried to explain he was with his Co-pilot but he was interrupted.

"Cadet Ackerson here has already gained acceptable flying grades for a pelican and you are certified for instruction, and-" the captain motioned for Jack to walk away from both the pod and the cadet to speak in private.

"His father is Colonel Ackerson, Lieutenant. I think you know how much sway that bastard has. So here's the deal. I need you to get this nugget capable of understanding radio chatter before we arrive ok? It's not for me, well, it is, but it's for my crew. I don't want any trouble happening because of his kid not understanding the difference between angels and cherubs." Jack looked back and saw the cadet was picking his nose. Elena was still sitting in the pod, staring at the floor.

"Alright, alright, yes sir, I'll do it, I'll do my best to instruct him, but don't expect a lot as I told you I'm not a standardized instructor at an academy" Jack said.

"I don't expect you to be, but you have experience so I'm having you do it" the captain told him.

"Is he by chance the one that was in the pod? I thought he was a Long Sword pilot with the previous configuration it was in sir" Jack asked Markovic.

"He's a Peli pilot. His father doesn't want him fighting just yet, though he probably played around with the GA-TL1 for play around purposes." The captain looked over at the cadet who was now looking Elena up and down as she sat in the pod.

"You didn't look up my score did you?" the cadet asked, and Elena looked up.

"What?" she asked confused.

"Did you look up my score? I swear; it was my first time and I didn't know how to work it, it isn't that bad for a first timer" the cadet told her. She looked over at the pod controls and noticed a previous score switch. She pressed it and a list showed up for Pelicans as well as Long Swords and other craft. One showed for sky hawks and she was surprised. The score before her was for a GA-TL1 Long Sword, and the fast snippet of replay video showed it crashing into a mountainside.

"It's not that bad, I'm pretty good right?" the cadet asked her. She pursed her lips slightly and tried to smile after seeing the virtual Darwin award.

"Interesting" she said, but expected herself to have the same difficulty, so she tried to shut up.

"Alright Cadet Ackerson, Lieutenant Gripen will be instructing you for the rest of this trip. I'll see you two later" the captain nodded to both and they saluted him.



"Just, hold on a second ok? I gotta talk to my Co-pilot quick" Jack sighed and walked over to Elena.

"Co-pilot?" the cadet whispered behind him to no one.

"Ok, look, I'm sorry, but it looks like I have to get this guy in the know of coms before we get to Reach" Jack told his daughter, who started frowning.

"I know, I know, you're supposed to stick to me like glue and it looks like you may be on your own for a bit like I told you. I'm gonna tell Ezekiel to keep an eye on you on the flight deck and the pod, and I'll see if I can't find that ODST, Buck, and see if he'll hang out. You already have enough to keep you occupied Elena. Morning gym, shower, breakfast, hang out and talk with people, do the sim pod, you can just sit around in your room, there's the entertainment room and the troops love it when you play it seems, you can hang out with the guys here as they kind of know about theâ€¦ thing, you know, the thing" he whispered as softly as he could so the cadet wouldn't hear him.

"I know, I know" Elena sighed. "I can find my way around now. Still, this sucks" she grumbled.

"I'm sorry, when we're down on Reach, I'll make it up to you. Besides, it's only five more days in slip space, and then one day merging with a fleet near Reach, and we'll be doing stuff on another planet. Sound fun?" he said, ruffling her hair. She nodded slowly but still had a sad face.

"Hey, I'll check on you in the morning and in the afternoon ok? And you're already making a lot of friends on board, it should be fine. Just relax" Jack grinned and got up, then turned around and told the cadet to get a move on to another room Elena didn't hear.

"Hope you brought your Bat decoder for him Jack!" She heard Ezekiel yell out to him then went back to his tools.

She looked up and saw her father take one last look behind him as he escorted the cadet forward, having a sad look on his face. She sighed and crossed her arms over her chest for a minute, disappointed.

"Fun trip this wasâ€¦" she whispered.

She decided at that point, that she was going to learn as much as she could while on board. If she couldn't get to hang out with her father, she was going to do what he said. She started up the pod again and selected the next mission for pelican flying.

\*\*[8 hours later, 1500 hours (Military Calendar)]\*\*

Elena was starving after she finished with flying colors another mission in the pod. She had flown in rain, she had transported volatile munitions, she flew a damaged transport as well as one under attack, and the last one that she had flown was a long distance transport just like what her father did to bring her to the Honor Bound. She even had to land with multiple damaged systems, and even lost power intentionally. She climbed out of the pod and looked around, seeing the flight deck seemed rather empty of

personnel.

\_They're probably eating nowâ€¦ I should do the sameâ€¦ \_she thought.

She walked out of the hangar and looked around, seeing a few people moving about. As she walked to the lift and got in, she noticed she wasn't alone. She turned and saw Jones standing behind her looking at a data pad. He noticed he was being watched and looked up.

"Hey Elena! Heading to the DFAC?" he asked in a friendly tone.

"Yeah, I got hungry after sitting in the sim pod this whole time" she said, her stomach growling in acknowledgement.

"Sim pod? Isn't that for trainees?" he asked a little confused.

"I didn't want to get rusty" she told him.

"Good for you girl, we all get a little bored without getting a chance to fly. You going to play again tonight? We figured this time we'd do a team match. We'd like you to play again if you're interested, and I'd like to be on your team thank you very much" She looked at him and he cracked a smile.

"Sure, why not, I don't have anything else to do. What time?" she asked.

"Well, how about 1900? That good?" he asked.

"Sure" she said, deciding then and there she was going to have some fun on her own in a ship she didn't belong on.

\*\*[Unknown area of \*\*\_\*\*Honor Bound. \*\*\_\*\*Camera #07 feed disabled]\*\*

"Might I ask why it is I was told to escort and observe the girl here sir?" a deep male voice said somewhere in the background noise of a computer being used.

"It's research I'm doing for a special project. Nothing you need to concern yourself with. Continue your observation where you can. She hasn't caught onto you yes?" another voice said, with a British accent.

\*\*[Vocal recognition cannot be confirmed. Rescanning]\*\*

"No sir, but I believe this is a misuse of multiple Spartans sir, but I'll continue to do as my orders state, until they get rescinded or I have gained superior orders for another mission" the first voice said.

\*\*[Location services unavailable. Tracking of area unavailable]\*\*

"Understood my boy. Your help however short it maybe though is appreciated here" the British voice chuckled.

"I should get back to my duties" the deep voice said. Heavy footsteps

could be heard leaving the area.

"Spartans have such closed minds outside of mission objectives they understandâ€¦" the British voice sighed and disappeared.

\*\*[Cameras feeds rebooted. Regained visual. Location services available. Tracking of area Deck 2 Q031-B1]\*\*

The room was empty aside from a large bed and other assorted furniture. A somewhat large desk was in the corner. A terminal was on top of the desk and was turned on, opened to a file with a recent picture and information on Elena.

(Author's note: You'd be surprised how easily it is apparently to be on a naval vessel or at a military base and look like you're twelve. A friend of mine knows someone who looks like she's barely in middle school and she's twenty something and a 2nd Lieutenant, so it's not as impossible as some people would think. It looks like someone got wrangled into watching Elena; I wonder who it could be?)

## 5. Adventure Like No Other Pt4

Elena had a fairly set schedule for the next few days.

She would wake in the morning at a set alarm; she would then go down to the gym and usually meet up with Buck and Jones, who would tell her what was going to happen that night in the entertainment room. She would then start to do a small workout, and she realized her father was right about trying to keep in shape. Until she did her morning exercise, she felt sluggish.

She would then continue back up to her room and take a shower and get changed into clean clothes. Afterwards she would go to see Dr. Wright and talk about all manner of things while eating breakfast. Her father would join her twice throughout the week to eat, but for the remainder of the time he went back on his promise to check on her. It was as if she was on her own on the ship, even with the friends she had gained aboard.

Once she had eaten, she would leave Dr. Wright's company and head down to the sim pod and continue her self-instructed training, and could practically fly the pelican blindfolded. She would then stop for lunch, and come back down and have Ezekiel and his crew teach her how to repair a few things on the pelican, though nothing was broken. Ezekiel showed her a few ways to even jury rig her pelican or a Long Sword fighter, with the assistance of Jones in using his own fighter as a test ground.

She would then go up for dinner and head to the entertainment room, where the troops would either be playing a game of some sort and invite her to join in immediately or watch a movie they were able to pirate when they were in system. She would then head back to her quarters and go to sleep, only to start the process again the next day, with some minor variation. She tried her best to figure out who was pirating the movies for the personnel, until Jones finally told her it was none other than the ship's A.I. Darwin.

\*\*[0500 hours, June 19\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\*, 2542 (Military Calendar) Marathon Class Cruiser \*\*\_\*\*Honor Bound, \*\*\_\*\*D2 Q030-B1]\*\*

Elena woke up groggily to the sound of her alarm. She turned it off and turned on her lights, and then slid out of bed and rubbed her eyes. It was the last day they were going to be on the ship before they headed down to Reach, and they had already exited slip space. Elena saw her father a few times throughout the week as he was getting frustrated with Cadet Ackerson. The Cadet couldn't figure out what her father was trying to teach him, it wouldn't get absorbed into his head. The boy, who was around twenty, was the most oblivious person she'd ever seen.

She got her set of clothes she had been using at the gym, which she had gotten cleaned at the laundry room after the first three days. She put her socks on and shoes, then walked outside and to the lift. Normally Dr. Wright was asleep at this time, and so she didn't have to worry about him asking so many questions until later when her brain was awake.

She descended to deck 74 and walked to the gym. As she entered she found the Master Chief in the high gravity area already doing sets. She did her stretches and a few sit ups, and then got on the treadmill. She jogged for two miles when in walked Pelkin and two other pilots in his little group.

"Ah, the little wannabe fighter pilot is here. That's just dandy" Pelkin snickered. Elena stopped jogging and turned the treadmill off. She didn't like how Pelkin treated everyone, especially her. She had seen him once after the first night playing the game, and he was just like her older brother, trying to get on people's nerves and berate them any way he could.

"What's wrong? Can't keep up with the speed?" Pelkin chuckled and his posse did the same.

"Just leave me alone Pelkin, I'm not here to take your crap, just doing my exercises" she said as she continued towards the cable machine. She figured she could do some pulls without a spotter on it since it didn't require keeping something over her head. Just as she reached it, a hand shot out and blocked her.

"We're using that, you can just go over there" Pelkin told her with a grin that creeped her out. His hand had landed right on her chest, and she pulled away and backed up.

"I didn't see your name on it" Elena growled out. She could hear faintly the sound of a barbell being put on its rack and no sound coming from the high gravity area.

"So? Fighter pilots tend to have a bit of leeway when it comes to things like this, kind of like Hell Jumpers. We're good, so we tend to get by with lot of exceptions" Pelkin waved his arms around and looked around emphasizing what he saw he had control over.

Elena had had enough and tried to walk out the door. She was blocked by one of Pelkin's lackeys.

"The door we are using too. You'll have to pay a toll, it's an exception" Pelkin grinned and Elena tried to struggle to get away. She was afraid, very afraid, as she had heard some horror stories of women being raped in the military.

"I'm not paying you anything! Let me go!" she yelled.

"Oh you'll give us something bitch, it'll be a good time had by all!" Pelkin snickered.

"Let go of me!" She screamed and suddenly a blur moved by and the man holding Elena launched into the air. The second lackey was flattened against the wall, indenting it and just as she looked behind her, she saw the Spartan had leg swept Pelkin, knocking his legs out from under him and brought his hand down on his neck, pinning him to the ground.

"You don't ever treat a girl like that! You hear me? Never!" the Master Chief was choking Pelkin, and he was desperately trying to struggle to breathe. He was gasping for air and Elena realized he would kill him if she didn't stop him.

"Master Chief! Stop it! It's ok! He can't hurt me anymore!" she grabbed his arms and tried to pull him away, and he suddenly looked up at her with a very angry face emblazoned on him instead of the mask of stone he usually wore. She backed up a bit, afraid he might turn on her next. He suddenly stopped being angry and looked at her sadly, then looked down at Pelkin who was starting to turn purple. He let go immediately and stood up to his full height, towering over Elena as she barely came up to his waist.

The Master Chief looked down at her as they both could hear choking coming from Pelkin and saw slow movements from the other two. Buck suddenly rushed in and looked around, seeing the Master Chief standing over Elena and she looked afraid, the three bodies of the attackers lying on the ground.

"What hell is going on? I just was in the other room and suddenly hear a loud crash, and the next thing I know there's a dent in the wall in front of me and this is what I find when I run in?" Buck looked into Elena's eyes and then at the Master Chief, who looked at Buck then Elena.

"He was protecting me. Pelkin, heâ€¦ he was gonna try and rape me" she was almost crying. Buck's face suddenly changed to shock, and looked behind the Spartan. Down on the ground and rolling over was Pelkin, slowly trying to get up as his friends did the same.

"You sure? Are you absolutely sure Elena?" he asked her sternly.

"Yes, I'm sure! They grabbed me when I was heading for the door, they were saying all sorts of things like stuff belonging to him, so I left, and he said the doors belonged to him too" she sniffled.

"Ok, ok, umâ€¦ let's get security here ASAP first" Buck said and ran his fingers through his hair, then walked over to a terminal and called for a marine security force to the gym. Within less than a minute, ten marines were running through the door, MA5Bs at the ready. They lowered their weapons when Buck explained the problem.

"Take these guys to the medical bay right now, then once they've been checked out, send them to the brig" Buck ordered and looked up at the

Master Chief.

"You could have gone easier on them Spartan, one of them looks like he has a fractured skull, the other could potentially have a broken spine, and Pelkinâ€¦ you could have killed him!" Buck waved his hands around and was snapping at the behemoth.

"I neutralized a threat to a pilot Sergeant, don't tell me you wouldn't have done the same" his deep gravelly voice showing some annoyance at being the target of the interrogation.

"Fine! Fine, whatever. Are you hurt Elena?" Buck asked.

"I'm fine now. The Master Chief hit them before they could do anything to me" she said, looking up at the Spartan. She hugged herself, still a little frightened about the whole thing.

"Hmm, well, as long as you're alright. Come on; let's get you out of here and up to your quarters." Buck walked Elena out of the room as John followed.

\*\*[One hour later]\*\*

Jack was sitting next to his daughter in her room, Buck leaning against the wall and Master Chief standing in the corner. Dr. Wright had found out what had happened and went to go talk to the Captain immediately. Jones sat on the chair at her desk.

"Son of a bitch, I never expected him to be able to go that far" Jones said, looking around at everyone.

"Only thing we can do is wait for the Captain to come in and talk with us. There will probably be a hearing of some sort I hope. How are you holding up Elena?" Buck asked her as Jack held her.

"I'm better, a little hungry thoughâ€¦" she almost whispered. She was staring at the floor and had her neck hunched into her shoulders.

"I'll go get something and bring it here for you" Jones said and rushed out the door.

"Don't worry Elena, that bastard is in the brig, he can't hurt you" Jack whispered softly to her.

"I have to ask this Elena, but did you say anything to provoke him in any way?" Buck asked.

"What? NO! He came in and started mouthing right at me with his little group and I tried to stay away from him, trying to do my exercises. He blocked me from using the cable machine and said it was reserved for him, so I told him I didn't see his name on it. He then started mouthing about how he got special treatment on board and when I tried to leave, he said the doors were his and I had to pay a toll" she explained to him.

"Did he mention what the toll involved in any way?" Buck asked.

"He saidâ€¦ he said I would give them something, a good time" she felt new tears welling up in her eyes.

"I'll fucking kill him" Jack growled. Jones rung the door, and Buck opened it. He walked in with a tray of different foods on it.

"I didn't know what you wanted to eat so I got a bit of everything" He said and put the tray down. She thanked him and picked up a slice of apple. The door rang again. Buck opened it to come face to face with the Captain and Dr. Wright behind him.

"Captain in the room!" Buck got out of the way and snapped a salute, as well as Jones and Jack. The Master Chief was at full attention faster than any of them.

"At ease all of you. Ms. Elena Esprit is it?" the Captain addressed Elena and she looked up.

"I'm deeply sorry to hear you had this unfortunate incident with Flight Lieutenant Erin Pelkin of the 234th Long Sword Fighter Wing. Iâ€| have a bit of bad news though" Markovic took his hat off and held it in his hands. He looked down at the ground and fidgeted with the emblem on the front.

"What is it sir?" Jack asked.

"Due to a previous order involving transferring Pelkin and his fighter wing to another sector of UNSC space to fight the Covenant, we must unfortunately ask that you drop any charges against him. The sector he is going to is understrength and under fire, and if his wing doesn't go, we will have a guarantee we will lose it." Elena couldn't believe what she was hearing. Pelkin was going to walk free.

"You can't be serious sir!" Jones exclaimed, looking around at everyone hoping for agreement.

"I'm afraid I am Lieutenant. I know you are frightened and angry right now Ms. Esprit, but rest assured there is a black mark on his profile as well as a demotion. He will carry this punishment for a good deal of time, now-" the captain couldn't finish before Jones interrupted.

"I can't listen to this shit. Permission to leave sir and get back to my duties" he asked, and the Captain sighed and allowed permission. Jones took a look at Elena and his face softened, and then he nodded and walked out.

"Now, as you may well know, we have arrived at Reach. Dr. Wright here would like you two to fly him down to the surface to CASTLE facility. The Master Chief Spartan-117 will be joining you on that flight. Pelkin's squadron will not be going down. They are being transferred to another cruiser in the vicinity and will likely leave the area soon. I know you are very emotional right now Ms. Esprit, and I feel for you, but we have a job to do and a war is happening. I trust you'll be able to pull through and do what you are here for."

Captain Markovic looked around at each person in the room, and then looked back at Elena.

"I'm sorry this has happened under these circumstances, but there's

nothing I can do. Please understand" he said and nodded, then walked out.

"My sincere apologies my dear, but I must go get my things packed. I do hope you'll be alright until we see each other on your pelican" Dr. Wright said to Elena, who still wasn't saying much, and left the room.

"I should get prepped as well" Spartan-117 said and left without another word.

"This is bullshit, but it can't be helped it seems. Keep your chin up and strong little missy, he might have made an enemy out of you, but you've made an awful lot of friends on this ship. Stay strong ok? I gotta go get prepped as well" Buck said and patted her on the shoulder. She nodded and looked up at her father as Buck left the room.

"I got to go grab my things as well, and I'll come right back up after I do it. You should eat and then take a shower, it'll make you feel better" Jack told her and hugged her close, then got up and walked to the door.

"You know it's funny, the UNSC is supposed to be fighting against all threats, not just an outside one. Can't believe they gave that bastard so much leeway" Jack said as he looked up at the ceiling, his hands on his hips, before he left.

Elena was alone now, and she picked up her tray and picked at the food Jones was kind enough to bring her. She then stripped and got into the shower. She washed quickly and then stayed under the hot water until the timer ran out, then grabbed her dryer and blow dried her hair, and brushed her teeth. She shivered as she replayed the events in her head over and over.

She packed her things in her duffel bags and put on her flight suit, then waited for her father to come back up. She heard a ring at the door, and unlocked it for him.

"Hey, you ready to go?" he asked softly. She gave him a small nod, and carried her things out, then headed for the lift. They went all the way down to deck 90, and opened the doors. People were running around and getting the pelicans and fighters prepped for takeoff, and Ezekiel walked up to both of them.

"Hey, we heard what happened. I guess now wouldn't be the best of times for something special would it?" he said and looked at both of them.

"What sort of special thing are we talking about?" Jack asked.

"Well, seeing as how the little fly girl here has made quite a bit of friends on board, and we don't know when we'll see each other again, we, well, when we were taking some pictures of the pelicans after maintenance and decided" eh, we should take a group picture. We'd also like to try and stay in touch, so here's a list of emails. Calling is a bit out of the question if you think about it Elena" Ezekiel gave her a big grin, trying to calm her. They walked into the hangar and saw Jones and some of the other pilots sitting on a bench.



Buck and his ODS'Ts were there, and the entire maintenance crew. Even some marines she had conversations with were sitting there. She figured there had to be at least 30 people there.

"Come on fly girl! Get in the picture! We got a spot in the middle for ya!" Buck yelled out and Elena smiled. She looked up at Jack and he nodded, and they both got in the middle. Even the woman that Buck was looking for, Veronica Dare, was beside him. Elena looked behind her and saw Dr. Wright and the Master Chief, who didn't seem very happy and had his mask of stone on, were standing behind her.

"Hey! Statue! Crack a smile for the lady will ya! We're running out of time here!" Ezekiel yelled and Master Chief, John-117, smiled for the first time she had ever seen. It looked extremely odd, like it didn't fit well, and he was fighting his face to stop himself from smiling, but he looked on and held it.

"Atta boy! Ok, it's on timer!" Ezekiel said and ran to his position. The camera flashed, and frozen in time, were all of those she had met on board the Honor Bound.

"And cut! That's a wrap folks! Let's hope we all make it through this war and see each other again! We can all remark at how ugly our smiles were! Because mine is hideous in that photo!" Ezekiel said and everybody laughed. Ezekiel went to a machine in the corner and started printing pictures for everyone, and then turned to Elena.

"Here. This is a copy of the photo on crystal storage and this is the photo for ya. You better not forget us because we aren't forgetting you! Or any of you crazy bastards!" Ezekiel yelled out and everyone agreed.

"Hate to break it to everybody, but it's time to fly" Jones said and everyone seemed a little down cast.

"Buck, are you flying in our Pelican?" Elena asked.

"Sorry missy, my boys and I are staying on board. The Honor Bound is taking us out for a special operation, beyond that I can't tell you, so this is goodbye" he said, putting his arms out for a hug. She embraced him and hugged back.

"Stay safe out there missy, and if we're ever on the same ship again, you have problems you tell me, I'll tear anything apart that goes at you you hear me?" he said as he pulled back and looked at her. She nodded and he looked at Veronica, who nodded as well.

"I got permission to ride wing for a bit until you enter atmosphere" Jones said as he checked his flight suit.

"Thanks Jones" Elena said smiling.

"No, thank you. This trip we thought was gonna be boring. I was thinking of going into cryo. But I had a blast the past few days." Jones sighed and looked to the door that sent him out of hangar nine.

"Well, I gotta get to hangar four. Keep flying high Elena. Jack, crash and burn" Jones put his fist out for a knuckle bump.

"Crash and burn" Jack repeated and knocked knuckles with Jones.

The Long Sword pilot nodded to her and walked off. "Oh, and Elena, you can call me Mark" Jones said. Elena smiled and nodded.

Jack looked to Elena as Jones left, and she nodded as if understanding. They both got their helmets and got in their pelican. They stored their baggage in their locker and heard the thumping of heavy footsteps. Standing behind them was the Master Chief fully suited in his MJOLNIR Mk IV powered armor. They couldn't see his face behind the mirrored visor, but Elena nodded to him and waved. He made a hand gesture at her towards his visor, some sort of finger movement. She thought it looked like a smile, and he quickly took his seat.

Dr. Wright walked on board with a marine carrying his things, and smiled towards Elena. He took his seat and the marine left after placing the bags in the overhead containers.

"I've never exactly enjoyed pelican flights going down. Up is a different story" Dr. Wright said to the Spartan sitting across from him. The Master Chief didn't respond.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" Jack asked Elena.

"Better now" as long as I don't have to see him again, I think I'll be fine" she said to him.

"Hey. I wanted to ask you something. You've been in that sim pod almost every day since you started, I checked the logs" Jack told her.

"And?" she asked.

"I was wondering, since you are my Co-pilot, and you did very well with the copy of the communication exam I gave to Cadet Twinkie back there" Jack thumbed behind him and heard some talking in the cargo hold. Apparently the Cadet was coming as well, without his own pelican.

"I thought I was flying this thing? Why is it I have to sit back here as a passenger? I didn't do that badly on the test did I?" They could hear him saying. Both of them shook their heads.

"What was his score by chance?" Elena asked.

"Bad. Really bad" Jack grumbled.

"Was mine ok?" She asked.

"You aced it are you kidding me? I've seen regular pilots screw that up, and you, you just breezed through it. You have a knack kiddo" Jack said as he strapped himself in. Elena did the same.

"Back to what I was saying. It's entirely normal for the Co-pilot to fly the second leg of the trip, despite the small free ride we had getting here to rest. How about it?" he asked her, and she gawked under her helmet.

"Well?" he asked, not seeing her response. She shook her head out of her stupor and tried to think.

"But, I mean, I just did the sim pod! I've never flown for real before!" She said bewildered.

"I checked the log; you have forty hours instruction on that alone. With some on hand flight training, and I could let you fly us between the bases we'll be at on Reach, you should have a guaranteed eighty hours of flight instruction at the very least, if not more. The UNSC is capable of giving a flight license to anyone, and there is no age limit noted as you have to be eighteen to join the UNSC, they never put it in." Elena blinked, trying to process everything her father was telling her.

"So the way I see it, even though your "contract" will expire at the end of this summer, the flight license will continue in effect. It only works for pelicans or commercial aircraft though, not Long Swords or military craft. You'd have to go through the academy for that" he told her. She was in shock.

"Butâ€¦ but I'd never get a chance to fly another pelican until I'm eighteen though! Where would I use the license?" she asked, excited beyond measure but still trying to think clearly.

"That's a special surprise for when we get back to Earth. I'll show it to you once we make the return trip" Jack chuckled. Elena was giddy, and she nodded as he told her to start the engines.

Elena went through her preflight with ease, already having it down to a routine from the sim pod drilling it into her. Jack watched each thing she did.

"You could do this blind folded. Some pilots forget certain things as they're under stress to get under way, but you just flew through that" he told her, and she giggled.

"This isn't you making a pass at the Cadet again is it?" she asked.

"Partly, but more complimenting you on a job well done. Two birds with one stone. Half insult, and half praise" he laughed and she laughed along with him.

"Oh no, maybe they have a nitrogen leak in there! They may need me to pick up piloting!" They heard a muffled voice come from the cargo hold.

"There is no nitrogen on board the pelican. If anything would be on board, it's liquid hydrogen and hydrazine" Jack said over the intercom, then cut it off quickly.

"I wonder if he left his brain back on Earth" he grumbled and checked outbound broadcast codes on a clipboard.

"Want to read these off to the CIC?" Jack asked her.

"I have to do the whole flight right? Sure" she said and grabbed the clipboard, and read down which codes she was using.

"\_Honor Bound \_CIC, this is Echo 2-1-2, calling out, ready for takeoff, how copy" Elena said sending outbound.

"Echo 2-1-2 this is \_Honor Bound \_CIC, good copy, you are number two in launch from hangar nine, what is your authentication?" CIC responded.

"Whiskey four delta tango one five three heading to C-" Elena saw her father wave his hands around.

"Not CASTLE, forgot to tell you, New Alexandria Strike Base. We don't have direct clearance for CASTLE, Dr. Wright forgot about that" Jack whispered. Elena continued on her outbound.

"Last transmission bad copy, repeat Echo 2-1-2" CIC said.

"CIC, authentication Whiskey four delta tango one five three to New Alexandria Strike Base, how copy" Elena finished and awaited a response.

"Good copy Echo 2-1-2. Authentication accepted. Echo 2-4-0 is launching, prepare for egress" CIC told them. They saw the pelican next to them go forward on its platform and the bulkhead doors close behind it. They heard an evacuation of air coming from inside and the outside doors opened. The green light lit up above the doors and she knew it meant the outside doors had closed. Her light was still red, so she couldn't tell the platform to move forward yet.

"Echo 2-1-2, proceed to egress" CIC told her and her light turned green. She flipped a switch. The platform moved forward and she double checked to make sure all systems were green, which they were. Her RORO was already up long before she opened coms outbound to get under way. The inner bulkhead doors opened and slid the pelican in, and then closed behind her, her running lights the only illumination outside.

The outside doors opened, and she waited. "Echo 2-1-2, this is CIC, you are clear for burn. Have a safe trip" she heard and engaged thrusters. She lifted off the platform and shot out, following a few other pelicans heading in the same direction. She saw on her radar a yellow blip show up, and she turned to see a GA-TL1 Long Sword flying on her wing.

"Echo 2-1-2, this is Shark 6-6, how copy?" she heard over the coms.

"Shark 6-6, this is Echo 2-1-2, good copy" she responded back.

"Hey there fly girl, expected your voice to show up. I didn't see any wobble when you left the deck, so I kind of assumed it was you flying" Jones said. She smiled under her helmet.

"Yeah, well, I learned from the best" she said, looking over at her father. He thumbed towards himself and waved her off as if she was faking.

"I would have to assume that's Jack you're referring to? I doubt I could figure out which button to work on that thing" Jones chuckled.

"Well duh! How good are you swapping your thrust vectors for vertical egress?" she asked, laughing.

"Pfft, I get launched from a mag rail; I hardly ever get to do hops. Still, would be nice to do it with the right pilots" he said softly.

"Nice to know where I stand Mark. We're coming up on the heat point, this is your stop fly boy" Elena told him, a hint of sadness in her voice. She didn't know if she was going to see her friend again. He was a fighter pilot, and he was being sent to a war zone.

"I hope to see you again fly girl. Keep your chin up, the only fate for you is the stars" Jones softly said.

"Dido!" she felt tears welling up in her eyes. He could die for all she knew.

"Echo 2-1-2 entering atmosphere. Thanks for the over watch Shark 6-6." She heard her voice crack at the end.

"Copy Echo 2-1-2. Shark 6-6 heading back." The Long Sword slowly turned around and headed away from them as they entered the thermosphere. All of the pelicans became small fireballs as the lone Long Sword left them to join up with its fighter wing.

\*\*[1000 hours, August 1\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\*, 2542, UNSC Frigate \*\*\_\*\*Royal Sovereign\*\*\_\*\*, Above Earth]\*\*

Elena was ready to head back down to Earth. Her summer vacation was almost over, and she looked back on everything she did. Once they had landed on Reach, Dr. Wright was escorted along with the Master Chief to a limo waiting for them, and inside Elena had caught a glimpse of the woman named Dr. Halsey. Then the limo disappeared out of the base, with the only thing left to remember Dr. Wright was him telling her he would keep in touch.

The entire vacation was flying pelicans to and from different bases around Reach, and in a few cases Elena was allowed to fly her own pelican as wingman to her father. She had never at any time expected that to be possible, and yet she was given the capability to fly alone. Most of her downtime involved reading anything she could get her hands on involving military flying, the different weapons that could be equipped on the aircraft, memorizing code words that she didn't have to know, as the list was always keep a book and no one was expected to know all of them at the same time, and yet she did. A few times they went out to try and see a movie, but they were both usually too tired to finish it and fell asleep half way.

She hungered for information to reach her goal. Now that she was coming back home, she felt sad that her time being a temporary contract to the UNSC was coming to an end.

She was already taking the pelican through the atmosphere with her father sitting back and reading, as she had asked for the chance to fly one final time before they were grounded.

\*\*[Six hours later]\*\*

Elena was depressed. They were driving back to San Francisco and she

didn't really want to talk much to her father.

"Hey, it's not all bad, you'll get to fly again soon" Jack said as he kept an eye on the road.

"Yeah, in maybe five years if I'm lucky" Elena grumbled and continued staring out the window. She noticed they weren't heading directly to San Francisco suddenly.

"Hey, where are we going?" she asked, looking at her father.

"A secret. You'll see" he said with a huge grin on his face. She looked confused, and started watching her surroundings. She suddenly noticed they were near Moffett Airfield.

"Dadâ€¦" she asked, wondering what was going on.

"I said it's a secret. Hold on" he said and they pulled in to the guard station, the guard there clearly already knowing who he was.

"Hey Jack, I see you want to come seeâ€¦ oh hey there missy! Lemme guess, showing her the surprise?" the guard asked.

"Yup. Today is the day" he told him smiling.

"You're in for a treat missy. I'll open her up for you quick" he said and pressed a button to wheel the gates open. Jack drove in and parked in front of a small hangar, which was still pretty large.

"What's this?" she asked, and he pulled out a blindfold. He put it over her eyes and told her not to peek. He then checked to see if she could see how many fingers he was holding up.

"Umâ€¦. Four?" she asked. He looked at his hand, which was balled into a fist.

"Good. Now no peeking" he said and ran off. She stood there for a minute as she heard rattling of a lock uncoupling and what sounded like a door on hinges.

"Ok, you can take the blindfold off" her father said and she slid it over her head. There, sitting in the middle of the hangar, was a very beat up pelican. It was missing one of its rear thrusters and its front left thruster gimbal was in shambles. The cockpit's windows were cracked or damaged, and there were armor plates missing from multiple spots around it. Its front wheel assembly was missing, and the RORO was hanging limply from the back. The paint was cracked and chipping off, but she was in complete awe.

"It's nowhere near what we flew for the past summer, but hey, it's a pelican" Jack told her, and he looked at her with a big smile on his face.

"I've been working on her where I can, and you'd be surprised what the UNSC is actually willing to just hand out free of charge to UNSC personnel for civilian use. As long as I don't equip any weapons on this thing, and with proper authorization, some spare parts I can get through the proper channels, one of which is Ezekiel." Elena walked

forward and put her hand on the nose. It felt rough and dirty, with mud covering the lower half of it.

"I figure you and I can fix it up, when I'm on Earth kiddo. It'll take a lot of work, but Ezekiel said he'd help if he's in the area, and I figure we could get it done in a year, maybe two? What do you say? You could fly it after on her maiden voyage." Jack looked at his daughter as she ran her hands along the side of it, and towards the cargo door.

"Yeah! Sure! This is gonna be awesome!" she exclaimed, extremely excited at the find he had shared with her.

"Now, as I said, it's going to take a lot of work to get up and running, and I really mean it. The whole thing is in shambles, not just the outside. We'd have to rework just about everything, but once she's done, heck, we may have a pelican better than anything else out there. We can install things you can't normally put on a UNSC issue flyer" Jack wiggled his eyebrows.

"Like the Ion generator? Or a Hydrogen condenser?" she asked.

"Yup, or the twin link emission INS tracker. Never get lost again as long as someone flew through the area before you" he laughed.

"What will we name it?" she asked.

"Well, I figure we'll name it once we get everything set up, until then, its name is shit heap" he chuckled. She laughed and looked at the amazing VTOL.

"Come on, I got to get you home now, but I just had to show you it. I knew you'd get a kick out of it" Jack walked up to his daughter and hugged her then gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"Hopefully this makes up for the odd voyage leaving here kiddo. I'm sorry I wasn't there to watch out for you" he said softly as they walked back to the pickup.

"It's ok dad, I've gotten over it. We're here and the summer trip was awesome" she told him.

"It was a great adventure huh?" he asked.

"Of course! I can't believe you got me on board in the first place! I don't think any other thirteen year old has ever done that" she told him.

"If they did, they aren't telling, that's for sure" he growled out amusingly. She giggled and got in the passenger seat as he closed the hangar door, her view of the pelican diminishing until the door was completely sealed. Jack got into the driver's side and started the truck up, then drove out of the airfield and back towards San Francisco.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

The red pickup pulled into the drive way of Elena's house and they both got out. Her mother ran straight to her and had her in a hug before she knew what was going on.

"Oh my god! I was so worried about you! Damn it Jack why didn't you call me? I kept trying to reach you two for who knows how long!" Elizabeth snapped at him.

"Hey! It's a little difficult to pick up a phone on another planet!" he yelled back.

"Another planet? You took our daughter to another planet? Which one? Why didn't you tell me your plans?" she screamed at him.

"Mom! MOM!" Elena backed off and looked at her.

"I'm fine mom. He took me on a trip that I agreed to. He asked me time and again if I wanted to go, and I said yes. It was awesome. We had so much fun and everything was fine!" she looked at her father who was wondering if she'd explain everything.

"Nothing bad happened! I met a Spartan mom! He hung out with us both ways! Well, not hung out with us, but he was nearby often enough, and I made a lot of friends!" she told her mother, trying to get her to calm down. Elizabeth looked at her and combed her finger through Elena's hair, pushing it behind her ears. She looked over at Jack who had his arms crossed over his chest.

"Are you sure you're ok? You had me so worried you didn't respond to my calls. I thought you were hurt or some catastrophe happened or the Covenant came" she said, her face showing extreme worry.

"Mom, we're fine. You're overreacting. I'm not a little girl who can't take care of herself. I'm growing up" she told her mother. Elizabeth nodded and looked at Jack again.

"She had a great time Liz. She'll never forget it she says. It was an interesting experience" he told her. Elizabeth glared at her ex-husband, but it softened and then swapped to her daughter.

"Alright, let's get you inside and you can tell me all about it" she said and put her arm around her daughter's shoulders, almost expecting Jack to carry everything inside.

"I have to get my things first" Elena said and grabbed two duffel bags. Elizabeth was surprised she could carry as much.

"When were you able to lift so much? You've gotten pretty strong young lady" her mother stared.

"Well, in the mornings we went to the gym for a few work outs to keep our muscles from having problems in slip space or when flying. I got used to it" Elena said and put her duffels down and slid her t-shirt sleeve up to show her bicep. It wasn't huge, but it was noticeably larger than when she left.

"I see! Hmmm, you'll have to tell me more inside. It's getting cold outside" Elizabeth helped her daughter inside with her bags and Jack followed. Elena turned around and looked at her father after she dropped her bags in the entrance hallway and her eyes gleamed.



"One hell of a ride huh fly girl?" he chuckled, and Elena nodded.

"Hey, give me a hug, I got to get going" he asked, and Elena hugged him. "I love you dad" she said with her face buried against his chest.

"I love you too sweetheart. I'll see soon" he said and kissed her forehead and stepped back a bit.

She watched as he walked back to his pickup and got in, turning it on and pulling out of the drive way. She waved goodbye as he turned on the lights, and saw him make a spin signal with his finger to her. She copied it and he drove off.

"What was that about?" her mother asked her.

"Oh, a flight term for "let's get this thing air borne." We used it a few times when we were flying" Elena told her.

"Oh." Elizabeth didn't understand what she was talking about, and Elena sighed. She was back to normal boring civilian life with no one understanding her. She couldn't wait until her father picked her up sometime in the future to go work on the new pelican. Until then, she'd have to survive each mundane day. At least she had Andy and Amber to help her along she thought.

She hoped she hadn't changed too much since she left, or even her own friends wouldn't want to be around her. The only way she could know for certain was to see them on the first day of high school.

"I hope you are ok with going to the store tomorrow to start picking up school items for the start of the year. I got you a new back pack already" Elizabeth said and pulled it out of the closet, a blue and white bag.

"Umâ€¦ I think I'll use the one I have now" she said and picked up her MULE modded camouflage pack her father gave her. The thing was a beast compared to the small blue bag her mother got her. Her mother looked at it then at the bag she got.

"Thanks anyways though, I could use it for other things" she said and smiled trying to cheer her mother up.

"Yeah, that's right, sure. We still need to get you the other things on the list though" she said as Elena went up to her room carrying her duffels. It was going to be an interesting time in high school now that she knew what life was like outside of being a teenager. She hoped she didn't grow up too fast in one summer.

(Author's note: Ok, I didn't really anticipate putting that gym scene in, it just sort of plopped itself in front of me and wouldn't leave me alone, so I justâ€¦. Well, put it there. I don't know if it was a good idea or not, but I think it came out alright. I got the idea from a similar scene from a Story written by AshleyBudrick, in which I got her permission for some of her characters to make cameos here, but not until further on. Like ten years further on, in the story I mean. I hope for positive reviews! It's doubtful Elena's two friends had nearly as exciting a vacation as she did I would think.)

## 6. Sweet Sixteen

\*\*[1400 hours, February 8\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\*, 2545 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, California]\*\*

Elena picked up her things as she heard the bell ring and shoved them into her backpack. She turned in her history homework in to her teacher and walked out of the classroom and up a flight of steps. Just as she reached the top, Amber almost jumped her.

"Hey there almost birthday girl! It's almost the big day isn't it?" Amber said and poked her friend playfully.

"Hey Amber, yeah, guess time is flying by isn't it?" Elena said, pushing her long black hair behind her left ear.

"You know I hope you get what Andy got for his sixteenth birthday in January. Remember that?" Amber said enthusiastically.

"How could I forget, he shot over to my house as soon as he got it. I guess he got his good grades then" Elena chuckled.

"I mean wow! His father bought him an M12 FAV for his birthday! He's like the only one in school who has one. I hope you get something just as special. Knowing you someone's got something special to give you" she winked and looked around, before shoving a small present into Elena's hands.

"Amber, you didn't-" Elena tried to say something.

"Yes I did, you're my best friend and I wasn't about to forget the most special year for a girl. Go on open it!" Amber said goading her friend to rip open the wrapping.

"It's not my birthday yet! I still have a day to go!" she said as she continued walking down a hallway and outside towards the bike racks.

"Oh come on! I want to see the look on your face! You're allowed one present before the big day!" Amber pouted and playfully pushed at her friend's shoulder.

"But you're coming to my birthday tomorrow though. It's a Saturday so there's no school. You'll get to see my face when I open it then" Elena said matter of factly.

"Please?" Amber whined.

"Fine" Elena rolled her eyes and laughed. She ripped the silver and yellow striped wrapping off of the small box, and then opened it. Inside, was a jacket patch, and on it was her emblem she had painted on her Long Sword model.

"Oh my godâ€¦| you didn'tâ€¦|" Elena looked up in shock.

"It took a bit of effort to find someone who could sew that, but I did, and now here it is. Happy early birthday Elena" Amber beamed as Elena hugged her.

"It's fantastic! Thank you so much!" she said leaning her head against her friend's shoulder.

"I have to look out for my peeps you know? And with you being into that stuff, gotta keep up with what my peeps like" Amber pulled back and Elena rubbed her fingers over the patch.

"It's a great present, thanks" Elena said again.

"Eh, how long have we known each other? I had to get it. It's a one of a kind, so no one else has it. You're my friend, you deserve the best" Amber punched her in the shoulder.

Elena giggled and heard a pair of footsteps behind her, despite so many people walking around and leaving as school was out.

"I can hear you Andy" Elena said as he tried to scare her.

"Damn, I can never sneak up on you" Andy walked up next to her and put his arm around her waist. His 6'3" muscled frame was a contrast to Elena's 5'10", though she was fairly toned.

"I swear; she's got super human hearing, like those Spartans out there in space. You could be a mini Spartan for all we know" Amber giggled.

"Well I know she's got me in awe" Andy smiled and looked at Elena, and she blushed profusely.

"I promised I'd take you straight home to your mother, apparently she's got something planned for tomorrow and I don't mess with that warrior goddess. You ready?" he said with a small smile, his green eyes staring into her blue.

"Um, my bike is here though" she said and looked towards the racks.

"My hog can carry it in the back. Come on. Later Amber, see you tomorrow" Andy pulled Elena towards the bike racks as Amber waved goodbye. Elena unlocked her bike lock and Andy picked it up, his muscles bulging slightly from the effort and slid it into the back of his warthog. The M12 FAV was a civilian model, built for luxury, its color was a dark blue mixed with a flare of green, and so if you looked at it at the right angle, it would change color.

"Can't wait till tomorrow?" Andy asked as Elena walked to the passenger door. "Here, lemme get that" he said and flipped up the plexi-wing door.

"Thank you" Elena said and got in.

Andy ran around and got inside the driver's seat. "No thank you, I get to drive with a pretty girl next to me" he smirked and leaned in a bit towards her. She giggled as he backed away, and he started the hog. The engine growled to life quickly, and he pulled slowly out of the student parking lot.

He drove down the street and down multiple hills before making a right down a one way only street, then after a few red lights turned onto Elena's street. Elena watched the traffic and pedestrians shoot

by as she seemed in her own world, day dreaming.

"You look dazed, credit for your thoughts?" Andy asked as he pulled into her drive way.

"Huh? Oh, just my dad told me he got the whole week off to come down for my birthday. Mom said she was going to a birthday breakfast for me as dad was going to do a birthday Lunch" she told him.

"And dinner you'll obviously be hanging out with us right?" he said as he turned off the warthog and put his arm behind her shoulder.

"Obviously" she said and blushed as she looked at him. She pulled up her tank top a bit as it was slightly sagging down her now much larger bust. Her mother was well endowed, so she figured the genes transferred. She counted herself lucky while going through puberty. She didn't worry much about oily skin, she had a C cup bra size so never had to worry about feeling insecure like some of the other girls in her P.E. class were, and she had a high metabolism so she could eat what she wanted and not worry about getting overweight. She had found out from her doctor that her genes are providing the size of her bust, so regardless of her exercise, she would have fair sized perky breasts. She still had to take vitamins though. She felt perfectly fine with her figure.

"Well, then I can't wait until tomorrow either. I'll get to show you my present your dad helped me pick" Andy told her.

"He what? I thought-" she looked confused. She knew her father was on board a frigate above them, so it was doubtful he came down to see Andy.

"I showed it to him over a phone camera. He said you'd like it" he smiled and leaned towards her.

"Really? And what might that present be?" She asked coyly.

"My lips are sealed until tomorrow. Well, partly sealed" he said and leaned in closer for a kiss. She was about to oblige when her mother came out.

"Elena! Elena! There you are" she said and broke the moment. Andy backed up and sighed as did Elena, and they both got out of the hog and Elena listened to her mother while Andy pulled her bike from the back of his huge truck.

"You didn't eat anything did you? I told him to bring you straight here after school. I needed to ask you a few questions for your big day tomorrow" Elizabeth said, her hair now showing strands of grey poking out at different places as it was tied into a ponytail. She had an apron on over what looked like a business suit, so Elena believed she had recently just gotten home from work.

"We didn't eat anything mom, Andy didn't take me anywhere" Elena grumbled and rolled her eyes.

"I took her straight here Ms. Gripen, as you asked" Andy said as he wheeled Elena's bike up to the garage.

"Thank you Andy. Now I need to take you to your dance class" Elizabeth said and tried to walk her into the house, but Elena backed up.

"Why couldn't Andy take me then?" Elena asked, confronting her mother.

"What? Well, because I like watching you dance. You're very emotional when you do it, and there's a you that comes out when you are dancing. Andy can come too if he wants to, he might pick up some moves watching" Elizabeth told her.

"Mom, you still haven't changed yet though" Elena told her. "And neither have you young lady. Let's go in and get dressed, and I'll even let Andy drive us there" her mother told her. Elena seemed to see her mother open up to Andy far more over the past few years.

"You better drive with utmost safety young man, I trust you with my daughter more than I trust her with her father. That's saying something" she said pointing to Andy and smirking.

"I'm always doing my best to protect her ma'am" Andy said.

"Hey, daddy isn't that bad. He's Air Force for crying out loud" Elena grumbled out to her mother.

"And he does things on a whim without telling anyone, and then finds out there are consequences that he didn't take into account that someone else make take the blame for" she said.

"What? When?" Elena asked.

"I'll tell you later, not in front of Andy. It's a bit private" she said, eyeing Andy quickly before looking at her daughter.

"Oh. Well ok is it that bad?" she whispered.

"Well, bad wouldn't be the term used for it, but as I said, I'll tell you later" her mother whispered back.

"Alright. Well, I should go get my things. I'll be down in an hour" she said and ran through the door and up the stairs. Elizabeth sighed and went inside, telling Andy he could wait in the living room. Her mother came down the stairs after fifteen minutes in casual attire, with sneakers on and jeans.

Elena came down after an hour in her dancing dress, a red and white flowered thigh high neck dress that cupped at the waist and conformed to her figure, and black Riviera shoes. She had changed her bra to a wraparound to hide under her dress. She was wearing red lipstick and a bit of green eye shadow and waterproof mascara. Her hair was in a messy bun. She carried her sneakers in her blue and white backpack her mother bought so long ago. Elizabeth smiled.

"Told you I'd use it for something. Spare clothes" she said. Andy's mouth hung open.

"What?" she asked him, smiling.

"Um, your mother lets you wear makeup now?" Andy said with a low whistle.

"What? It's for dance class. I'm looking the part. Mom knows I don't usually wear makeup unless I'm supposed to impress in some form, it's what it's there for. The other girls in the basic classes did the same" she told him.

"Basic classes? What class are you in?" Andy asked looking her up and down and cocking an eyebrow, grinning.

"Private lessons now. The instructor figured I was the best of the girls in my last class, and I went through a small competition. I didn't screw up once apparently, compared to the others. After that, I was taken under his wing. I doubt I'm competition material, but I'd like to think I'm good" Elena she told him, smirking.

"I see" Andy rubbed an invisible goatee on his face.

"Get your mind out of the gutter full back and get it in the game" she giggled out and poked him in the side.

"Yeah yeah" So where are we headed?" he asked her.

"Iglesias dancing studio, up Fifth and Tate" she said and Andy helped her mother into the back then helped Elena into his large truck because of her heels.

When they reached the dance studio, Elena quickly got out and Andy helped her mother out of the truck. Elena slowly went up the stairs and entered the dance theatre as Andy and Elizabeth sat in the front of the seats.

"Ah, Elena, pleasure to see you always SeÑorita. You'll be dancing with Alonzo today. Is that alright?" the instructor, an elderly looking Latino man said.

"Yes, that's ok Alex. I'm fine with it" she said and took her place with Alonzo. He was wearing black jean pants and a white dress shirt with a black vest over. All of them were wearing some form of heels or shoes designed for dancing. Alonzo looked fairly striking, his black greased back hair and bangs showing suave demeanor, and his body was nothing to slouch over given he was into dancing. Andy looked him over and felt a hint of jealousy, then quickly thought better. She loved him, she was just dancing with Alonzo because Andy didn't know how.

Elena did a few warm ups, Alonzo helping her stretch her legs, one of which had Alonzo grab her ankle and she leaned back, and Andy felt a little agitated as he could easily see up her dress. Then he pulled her back and had her help him with warm ups, one of which had him carry her on his bicep. Elena was put down and she reached her left arm high and crooked it behind her back, and Alonzo put his hand on her elbow and helped her stretch further. The whole warm up session took a good ten minutes.

"Alright, are we warmed up? It's going to be a bit of a free for all, and sadly I only have a half hour today, my niece's Quinceañera is today, and I absolutely cannot miss it" Alex said smiling.

"I wish her a fantastic day then. My sixteenth birthday is tomorrow" Elena said excited.

"Amazing! Well then, we shall have you dance the dances of passion and life today. I wish you a happy birthday, and hope many more will come. Salud y amor y tiempo para disfrutarlo. Now, are you ready?" Alex asked. Elena nodded, her warm ups complete.

"Alright and a one two three" Alex said as the music started.

\*\*(Music: N'Klabe "I like Salsa")\*\*

Andy was astounded. She moved like water with Alonzo as he slid her around and twirled her in the air. She showed quite a bit of skin throughout the dance, but her mother didn't seem to mind. It was part of the dance. The clothes were meant for freedom of movement, and it did just that.

At one point, Alonzo cartwheeled Elena through the air then twirled her three times, then when her back was turned came up behind her and mimicked her hip movements with his hands on top, covered by hers. It was seductive, it was mesmerizing, and Andy felt a bit of jealousy, since he couldn't do even half the things Alonzo could do with her. She was almost flying without leaving the room.

As the song ended, another started up and Alex told them it was Bamboleo. They acknowledged and went back to dancing, this time to a different tune. It was still quite fast.

"She's an advanced student, so she knows most of the moves" Elizabeth whispered to Andy.

"She's unbelievable! I didn't know anyone could move or balance themselves like that" Andy gawked.

Elena back flipped over Alonzo's arm and he caught her after, holding her hand at one point and never letting go, as they continued through multiple moves, their hands never unlocking.

Alex switched to another song, Djoba Djoba by Gipsy Kings, then finally Bailaores by Ojos de brujo. Andy couldn't keep his eyes off of Elena. He knew she was taking dance lessons for the past three years, but she never told him she was this good.

"Wonderful! Fantastico! Estupendo!" Alex said as they stopped, both out of breath, as Elena was pressed against Alonzo looking into his eyes, her right leg pulled up and his hand holding her thigh. Andy felt definitely jealous now.

"It has been awhile since I have met someone who could keep up with me in the dance. I only wish you would reconsider joining me for the competition" Alonzo told Elena.

"I can't, isn't the competition this coming week?" she asked.

"There are other competitions during the summer. I know you are still in school, but I do not think I will find another partner quite like you" Alonzo said with his Spanish accent. He kissed her hand while

looking into her eyes.

"Well thank you" she said, blushing. Andy looked slightly irked.

"Well Señorita, I believe we must end today's lesson. I must say, I have very little I can teach you beyond today. But I might have a thing or two left" Alex told her. She giggled.

"You always say that and it's never true!" she said, still giggling.

"This time it is true. You have been like a sponge, soaking up everything I have taught you and copied the moves flawlessly. At first you had to learn what dance was truly like, but now, after so many years, you have budded like a rose. I believe I will finally have to do something I have never done before. I will have to turn you over to my wife!" Alex laughed. Elena laughed with him as did Alonzo.

"She isn't here is she? The last time she was here, I do believe I could not keep up with her dancing moves" Alonzo said a little worried.

"You? Not keep up with her? How fast is she?" Elena asked, gawking between him and Alex.

"Ah, you see, my wife does not necessarily dance salsa. She dances the flamenco, or flamenco dancing. Tapping of the shoes to the beat, and usually it is the woman who shows control over the rhythm, not the guitarist. I know it is not salsa, but perhaps you would learn from her? There are a few different moves, but it can further help with quick movement of the legs, which you are already quite good at" Alex chuckled.

"Well, I guess I'll try. Another few years wouldn't be bad, wait, how nice is she?" Elena asked.

"She's a harsh task master, but once you learn, she welcomes you with open arms. Simply look at me" Alex pointed at himself and faked groveling. Alonzo and Elena laughed.

"I know you did not say that Alexander!" a woman said coming through the door smiling.

"Ah, there she is, the love of my life" Alex said and introduced her.

"May I introduce my wife, Lady Cecilia Esperanza. She holds another school nearby for flamenco" he said and hugged her close.

"He lies through his teeth! Don't ever listen to him when he speaks of others. Flamenco is a dance of artistic passion. You show it in your moves, your balance, and your dress. You are not something showing how much acrobatics you can do, but how well you can keep a rhythm and have music listen to you" Cecilia told Elena and smiled warmly.

"Has dance been in your family for long?" Elena asked.



"Yes, Flamenco and salsa have been in mi familia for many generations. My brother decided to do Mariachi music and sings. He also writes serenades and does flamenco. Alexander does salsa and his sister teaches basics, however she also does Tango." Cecilia turned around and saw Andy and Elizabeth standing behind them, out of the conversation.

"Ah, but I am keeping you from your family. Who is this, your brother?" Cecilia asked.

"No, this is my-" Elizabeth cleared her throat and Andy nodded in understanding. She decided to hell with it "boyfriend, Andy." Cecilia looked him over and walked around him.

"Strong legs, good arms, he's mui mango he is" she chuckled to her husband. He sighed.

"What did she say?" Elena asked.

"She said he's a cutie, it's an affectionate compliment" Alex told her.

"Cecilia, detener la verificaci3n de mi competencia!" Alex chuckled and Cecilia scoffed and walked over to him, and held his hand.

"She needs to keep a handle on him, or he could get away" she whispered to Alex.

"We are not dealing in the relationship department Ceci, we do the dance" Alex hugged her and she nodded.

"I apologize, but we need to get going." Alex motioned towards the doors and Elizabeth wrote a check to them for the lessons. Elena walked outside as Andy followed her.

"What's wrong?" Elena asked as Andy looked down at the ground.

"Huh? Oh, just thinking. Think I could learn to dance like that?" he asked wincing.

"Of course! You just have to get into the rhythm. Why, want to be my dance partner?" she winked coyly.

"Well, I just think I could use the balance and you know, if we ever danced. I just figured, since Alonzo can do that-" he said.

"Alonzo is just my dance partner, I've danced with him before. His wife is a singer" she told him.

"Oh! Oh!" Andy said, looking sheepish.

"Salsa is not just about balance, it is coordination with your partner and providing a counter to their moves as well. Have you ever taken dancing lessons before?" she asked.

"Well, no, but-" he tried to do a little jig on pavement. She laughed. He felt awkward and stopped. She smiled at him.

"Alex told me once that salsa and any other dance style is not about putting on a show for others, but putting a show on for your partner.

You put your effort and skill into making your partner enjoy the dance, regardless of how well you perform. Regardless of how well you dance, if you or your partner does not enjoy it, there was no reason to dance" Elena explained.

"Here. Take my hand, put your other hand on my hip" she said and placed his hands where she told him.

"Now, we're going to do a box step. It's very simple. Just let me lead, and follow. It goes" she started to move in a box, slowly moving her right foot back then slid her left foot diagonally, and slid her right foot quickly to her left foot "slow, quick quick, slow, quick quick, slow, quick quick. Think you can do that?" she asked.

"I think so" Andy said and tried to do the movement. She followed his movements, knowing if he stepped on her toes it could cause a problem. He followed the movements in his head, concentrating and tried to look down at his feet, but then realized he was looking straight down her dress.

"Sorry" he said and immediately looked up.

"Yeah eyes up here bucko" she chuckled.

"No, I'm trying to look at my feet andâ€¦ yourâ€¦ breasts are getting in the wayâ€¦" he chuckled as he said that.

"Oh, well think of your feet moving in math. Measure forward, then angle, then measure back, then angle" she said and he followed, now becoming more fluid.

"Good! Now, try and slowly rotated us around, making the square turn the way you want it. There is no speed requirement, go as slow as you need to make the square continue" she advised. She started to turn as he did his steps, and he turned with her, seeing why she was doing it as it brought a new view and eased up on where his feet were going, making it not so difficult to keep the polygon.

"Good! Now, ready for a small move?" she asked.

"With you? Sure" he said softly and looked into her eyes.

"Ok, the next stop on the box, you're going to lift your hand from my hip, and I'll slide my hand down your arm, and you'll push me back while still holding my hands then pull me in. I'll twirl under your arm and you'll keep your right arm around my back and still hold my right hand with yours left. You then take the same steps, slow quick quick slow, quick quick around me as I stay in place, doing the same steps just smaller backwards. Ready?" she asked.

"I think so" he laughed as they stopped their box just as Alex and the rest came down. Elizabeth saw as Andy pushed her back then pulled her in, twisting her under his arm and holding her as he stepped around her to the inner beat he was concentrating on. She turned her head and locked eyes with him as he traveled around her slowly.

"I take it back, I think she already has him" Cecilia said.

Elena leaned her forehead against Andy's chin as they slowly stopped,

forgetting about the dancing and just standing there holding hands. They forgot about time itself.

"I sadly have to break this memorable moment, despite not wanting to" Elizabeth said and cleared her throat. Elena and Andy jumped apart.

"It was a pleasure meeting you Elena. Come see me if you're interested in flamenco please" Cecilia said and hugged Elena. Alex hugged her next and Alonzo took her hand again and kissed it.

"Until next time mi bailarina de beautiful" he said softly. She blushed heavily as he stared into her eyes. They left as Andy got Elena's mother into the car, and as Elena got into the passenger seat, she immediately peeled her heels off and pulled out her sneakers.

"Oh, that's so much better" she sighed in relief.

"I thought you enjoyed those" Andy said.

"You clearly don't understand women Andy" Elizabeth chuckled. Elena laughed as Andy shook his head and smiled, then turned on the hog and pulled out of the parking lot.

\*\*[0900 hours, February 9\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2545 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, California]\*\*

Elena heard knocking on her door and woke up bleary eyed.

"Elena! Elena wake up! Come on birthday girl! I know you're in there!" she heard Amber yelling through her door.

The door opened and Amber walked in, seeing her friend sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

"Yeah, sure, come right in, I could have been naked, but walk right in all the same" Elena grumbled.

"You don't have anything I haven't seen in the gym changing rooms girl, or on myself" Amber raised her eyebrows and smirked.

"Yeah yeah. Why are you here so early?" she asked in a low sleepy voice, taking a deep breath to get some oxygen flowing.

"I figured I'd hang out with you the whole day, your parents said it was fine. Why, is that a problem?" Amber asked in a mock hurt tone.

"I kind of figured I'd get a chance to sleep in on my birthday, you know, the day that's special to that person, the one where we kind of get some leeway in what we do?" she said, scratching her shoulder and blinking a bit.

"Oh whatever. You can sleep when you're passed out from partying. The rest of the gals are coming over too during lunch, right?" Amber asked.

"Yeah, I invited them. Jennifer is bringing her new boyfriend along too, and Maria's bringing her brother. Andy is coming alone" Elena

said and looked around.

"Well, he won't be alone if he has you" Amber said coyly. Elena was not amused.

"Doesn't Maria's brother have a crush on you?" Amber asked.

"Only cause of my breasts. He'll look at anything with big tits. Hey, I'd love to play twenty questions with you all day, but I should get up and take a shower if you're not gonna let me sleep in" she grumbled looking up at her best friend.

"Sheesh, grumpy. I'd hate to be your mother when she wakes you up in the morning" Amber rolled her eyes and smirked.

"I have an alarm clock you know" Elena blew at her bangs hanging over her left eye. The hair flew up then landed right where it had been before.

"Come on, wake up take a shower, your mother made chocolate chip pancakes" Amber said and got up off the edge of the bed.

"I'm awake, I'm awake" Elena said and slid out of her bed covers, her pajamas un-wrinkling and hanging towards her ankles. Amber went downstairs as Elena walked into her small bathroom and stripped her pajamas off, then took a shower. She then dried her hair and put on her bra and panties, then a pair of black jean shorts and a white t-shirt. She slid a pair of black socks over her feet and finished it with a pair of black sneakers with white soles. She picked out a corduroy jacket for when they went out, and a grey wool cowl turtleneck because it was cold outside.

Elena stepped slowly down the steps, still trying to wake up. As she entered the kitchen, Amber was already sitting and drinking a glass of orange juice while her mother was flipping pancakes.

"Well hello there birthday girl. Did you sleep well honey?" Elizabeth asked as she flipped another pancake on a large plate to be served.

"Yeah. I guess the dancing really tuckered me out" she said as she sat down and poured some orange juice into her glass.

"I heard Andy watched the whole thing. If he wasn't gaga over you before, he is now" Amber grinned and took a sip of her orange juice.

"Any guy would go gaga over skin. It's just how their brain works" Elizabeth entered the conversation.

"Mom!" Elena almost spit her orange juice out of her mouth as Amber raised her eyebrows in surprise and grinned.

"What? I was young too you know. When I was at the beach a long time ago, I wore this little bikini and your father couldn't stop staring at my chest, and when I lost my top in the water-" Elena waved her hands for time out.

"Whoa! Whoa! I don't need to know about you losing your top in the water mom, wow. TMI" Elena said and Amber giggled while trying to

take another drink.

"Oh you girls are no fun. I was lucky enough to have your father there running after he emerged from the water wearing the top on his head" Elizabeth continued.

Amber put down the orange juice glass and started laughing hard, and Elena even started laughing. Her mother looked at both of them and smiled.

"Wow mom, you must have had every guy there staring at you" Elena tried to say through giggle fits.

"Actually I did, and saw a lot of hands slapping their faces when their girlfriends saw they were looking" Elizabeth said as she sat down. She started serving Elena two pancakes, then placed two for Amber, and finally served herself.

The doorbell suddenly rang. "I'll get it Ms. Gripen" Amber told her and she shot from the table. The door opened and Amber walked back in with Andy.

"Well hello Andy, come for the pancakes?" Elena's mother asked.

"Just to see the birthday girl Ms. Gripen, don't want to intrude" Andy told her.

"Nonsense! Have you eaten yet?" Elizabeth asked.

"Not yet Ms. Gripen" Andy responded, and looked at the pancakes.

"Then sit down in that chair immediately. I'll go get you a glass and a plate" she said and got up to retrieve some utensils, a plate and a glass for him.

"Thank you Ms. Gripen" Andy said.

"I've told you before, call me Elizabeth" she growled then smiled at him. He sighed and smiled back and apologized.

"So Andy, you gonna give her your present yet?" Amber asked as she smeared butter over the top of her pancakes and poured maple syrup on top.

"Well, I should wait until she's finished with her birthday breakfast" Andy smirked.

"Oh come on! Show her!" Amber demanded.

"It's ok, it's more special if I wait with baited breath" Elena winked at him.

"Your breath is not baited, trust me" he smirked.

"Really? And you would know this how?" Amber asked goading him into explaining.

"Oh stop Amber" Elena smirked and rolled her eyes.

"What? I simply would like an answer to my question, nothing wrong with that is there? So tell me, is her breath maybe mint then? Or fruity? Or lusty? Intoxicating?" Amber asked. Elena threw a bit of pancake at her and Amber blocked the piece, laughing.

"Ok you two, no food fights at the table, that's for eating and enjoying, not carrying around in your hair as a new style. Syrup is notorious for feeling nasty in your hair" Elizabeth smirked as she put a new plate down for Andy. Both girls stopped horsing around as Elena's mother sat down and served some pancakes to Andy.

\*\*[1200 hours, February 9\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\*, 2545 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, California]\*\*

The doorbell rang and Elena opened it. Two girls screamed excitedly and flung their arms out for hugs.

"Happy birthday Elena! Oh my god! You're sixteen now! Wow, you so have to go get your driver's license like, ASAP! I swear!" Jennifer squealed in delight as Maria hugged Elena.

"Hey you guys! Thanks. I may eventually do it, if my mom lets me go down to the DMV. But I don't really have a car to drive besides my mom's" Elena thumbed towards the garage.

"Oh, you could save up for one soon, or maybe Andy's father will buy you one, you know, if you married him or something" Maria giggled and Andy rolled his eyes.

"Or she could drive my truck when I'm tired and that way she gets to go where she wants and I can sleep after football practice. Best of both worlds" Andy joked.

"Oh come on. Your parents are filthy rich; wouldn't they want the girlfriend of their son to have a nice car too?" Jennifer said just as her boyfriend came up and into the door.

"Sure, then they could feel the need to buy everyone else here a car" Andy said with mock excitement.

"Really?" Jennifer asked.

"No, not really" Andy stopped looking excited and rolled his eyes.

"Pfft, they're the president and vice president of some major company right? Why wouldn't they be able to afford another car? Don't they get driven everywhere in limos anyways?" Jennifer seemed oblivious to the fact money didn't grow on trees.

"Yeah, COBB industries, so what?" Andy said.

"You never told me your parents were the VP and president of COBB" Elena said to him.

"Yeah, well, I told them about you. They kind of want to meet you" Andy rubbed the back of his head.

"I think they already did a while ago. Back on I think Cairo Station"

Elena thought for a moment.

"You know about the company?" Maria asked.

"I flew equipment to some of the MAC platforms their helping build in geo sync a few years back during the summer with my dad, we also transferred some-" Elena saw the look of utter astonishment on both of the girl's faces.

"You can fly?" Maria asked surprised.

"I have my Airmen's license and pilot certificate, yes. For a D77-TC Pelican and a Bumble Bee escape podâ€¦ what?" she told them then wondered why they were looking at her like she grew two heads.

"You never told us you were able to fly! Wow! Wha, how did you do it? When?" Jennifer said as she pulled her boyfriend inside, Tyler his name, as if he was a toy.

"It doesn't matter now. It's in the past. I can't really talk much about it, but yeah, I can fly. I can't drive yet, but I can do burn hops easy as pie" Elena said crossing her arms over her chest.

"Wow, just wow. I never, I mean, that's awesome!" Maria said wide eyed and blinking, trying to make sense of what her friend just said. Maria's brother was standing behind her, his black rimmed eyeglasses not hiding the fact that he was staring at Elena's bust.

"Hey! Eye to eye pal!" Maria slapped him upside the head. He mumbled sorry and Maria sighed.

"H-happy birthday E-Elena" Marcus said.

"Thanks Marcus" Elena smiled and he sheepishly smiled back.

"Well, now that we're all here, I think we should try and open some presents, then head out for lunch. What do you say?" Andy asked everyone.

"Sure! But the lunch bit my dad is doing, though I think he'll be ok with everyone else tagging along" Elena said as everyone looked to her for a response. They ran up to Elena's room and took seats where they could find them.

"Ok, this is from Jennifer" Amber said and pulled out a small box. Inside was a bumper sticker saying "Space or bust."

"Jennifer" Amber glared at her.

"What? She's into going to space!" she said looking around at everyone.

"She's interested in flying! Regardless of if it's "Atmospheric or Spatial!" did I say that right?" Amber snapped at Jennifer who scoffed and then turned to Elena.

"Eh, close enough. It was still a thoughtful gesture. Thank you" Elena said and pulled it out of the box. Jennifer smiled at Elena and stuck her tongue out at Amber. Amber narrowed her eyes at her for a brief second then turned back to the next present.

"Maria is next" Amber handed Elena another box, and she opened it to find a small key chain with a chibi ghost on it.

"Oh my god, wow. That's so cute!" Elena said and held it up for everyone to see.

"Your nickname made me pick it up. I nearly didn't find it. I was looking all over the place for something, and that just popped out" Maria told her and looked around hoping it wasn't a bad gift.

"I love it. Thank you" Elena hugged Maria and then turned her attention to a box Marcus brought. It was fairly small, and when she opened it, a small see through angel was lying inside of it.

"Wow, um, this is nice Marcus" Elena picked it up and looked at it in the light of her room. The facets suddenly sparkled and everyone looked at him.

"I-it's real. W-we're working on a multi particle compressor at the school for a science project. I made it. I-its real diamond. I-I made it for you" Marcus said fidgeting. Everyone was gawking.

"Particle compressor? You mean like the attachment for an Ion generator for filtering?" Elena asked. Everyone looked over at her and Marcus seemed in heaven that she understood.

"Y-you k-know about it?" Marcus asked.

"I had to move one that was going to be used on a new type of prototype fighter. Never got to see the craft, but the parts I saw in action. It cleans abnormal particles away from the generator and hardens them into something that can be picked up and either thrown away or used as materials for something else" Elena explained. Marcus looked at her dreamily.

"Easy there stallion" Andy growled. Marcus came back to reality after day dreaming, most likely something involving Elena. Everybody laughed as Marcus scrunched himself up sheepishly.

"Finally, is Andy" Amber grabbed a big box just as Jennifer smacked the back of her hand against Tyler's stomach.

"What?" Tyler asked.

"You didn't get her a present" Jennifer growled.

"You said I didn't need to" Tyler dumbly responded.

"You always get a girl a present!" she snapped at him. He just looked dumbfounded.

"Open it" Andy said as Elena looked at him. She tore off the wrapping and popped the top. Inside, was an aviator's jacket. Elena was speechless.

"Can't fly without one of those" Andy told her and put his arm around her waist as she sat on her bed.

"This isâ€¦| this is incredible! Where did you find it?" she asked



him.

"You'd be surprised how hard it is to find one of those. I had my mother help me with some fashion designer, and they searched for me as I couldn't find one your size. I nearly gave up, but they found one somewhere in Texas, so they flew it over and here it is" he said as he grinned softly and raised both of his eyebrows once.

"I love it! I absolutely love it!" she leaned in and kissed him, and everyone broke out in unison with an "awwwww."

Amber let out a "Bow chicka bow wow" and everyone laughed.

Elena tried not to giggle while kissing Andy and they quit halfway and pulled away from each other.

"Thank you, all of you. This is great" she said and Andy pushed her off the bed and onto her feet.

"Try it on" he said and helped her slide her arms through the sleeves.

"Now you're ready to go anywhere girl" Amber gave her a thumbs up.

Just then the doorbell rang.

"Who's that I wonder?" Andy smirked and looked at Elena.

"It's gotta beâ€|" she said and looked around at everyone before running down the stairs. She flung the door open and there, standing on the steps, was her father.

"Sweet sixteen, gonna be tough to beat all of those presents your friends brought you" Jack chuckled.

Elena lunged and hugged him, he spinning her around him a bit.

"Happy birthday honey" he ran his hand lightly over her head and kissed her forehead.

"Thanks daddy" she said with her face pushed into his jacket.

"So when are we eating?" Tyler asked. Jennifer elbowed him in disgust as everybody watched the moment.

"Yeah, when are we eating? I got plans for the fly girl to go to Iroquois Steak House right now" Jack said grinning. Everyone looked at him as if he was crazy.

"You didn't. For lunch?" Elena asked.

"A Captain owed me a favor and got in touch with his brother. Large table with a view. Special party. Pays to be a pilot" he grinned down at her.

"I guess, we'll catch up with you later then" Amber told her.

"I made the reservation for a large group" Jack looked up at the

other teenagers. They all looked at each other excitedly as the girls squealed.

"We are going to the most expensive Steak House in San Francisco! Wow! Your dad is so awesome!" Jennifer squeaked out and did a little bunny hop.

"And I have a small surprise followed by a big surprise" Jack said pulling away from his daughter.

"What's the small surprise?" she asked.

"You'll see at the steak house" he grinned.

\*\*[One hour later]\*\*

The elevator opened up to a rooftop restaurant that was set in low mood lighting. A fire was crackling in a fireplace on the left wall and the sunken floor below them was covered in tables. The back area was cut in half, large windows separating the outside tables from the inside. There were booths deeper into the restaurant. The walls were red brick, and the kitchen was almost a part of the scenery, not hidden behind doors. There was a glass wall that covered an entire room filled with different wines, and what looked to be stairs that entered the floor below them, probably for storage.

"Hey there fly girl, you still have that data crystal don't you?" Elena heard a voice around the corner. Standing in a suit near the bar, was Ezekiel.

"Oh my god! I can't believe you're here!" Elena ran and hugged him as the teenagers watched them.

"Who is that guy?" Amber asked.

"She met him when we had our summer vacation three years ago. She's been friends ever since. He's in charge of the maintenance crew that works on the pelicans we flew. He watched out for her when I wasn't around, most of the time" Jack told them softly.

"Sheesh, she makes friends like gnats to a ripe banana" Jennifer responded.

"We should go sit at our table. I came just for this special occasion. I'm on shore leave for a week" he told Elena.

Elena walked with Ezekiel as Jack led the teenagers to a large booth with a huge round table in the middle.

"And the special girl sits in the middle, next to her da" Ezekiel said, scratching at his red hair. Elena had heard stories from him about his family being from Ireland originally, and then spread throughout the colonies. Almost all of them were mechanics or technicians, a few were chemists. She enjoyed hearing his tales of his family as they worked on the pelican restoration.

Andy slid in on her other side, and the rest of the teenagers mixed together.

The waiter walked up briskly and stood at the front of the

table.

"Greeting Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Rico, I'll be your waiter this afternoon. Today's specials are an herb roasted prime rib and lobster tail with a side of steamed vegetables, we have an Andouille-crusted swordfish with chipotle pepper sauce, and we also have a Iroquois signature salad of fresh tomatoes with a basil and rosemary herbed chicken and a blue cheese and Riesling wine dressing. Our wine specials today are a Mishelmer GewÃ¼rztraminer and a Guilerde Savignon Blanc aged one year, we also have a Terge five year Syrah and another Terge five year Cabernet. For dessert we have a CrÃªme brulee and a special deep fried homemade vanilla ice cream. Does anybody have any questions?" Rico asked. Tyler almost immediately tried to say something but Jennifer slapped her hand over his mouth.

"Alright then, what would everybody like to get started on drinking tonight?" the waiter asked.

Elena looked through the drinks listing and found it mind boggling. There were three pages devoted to wines alone, then two pages for beers and mixed alcoholic beverages. She finally reached the normal drinks.

"I'll have a martini on the rocks" Jennifer asked, trying to sound elegant.

"Alright then, may I see your ID please?" Rico asked as he scribbled a martini down on his small check board.

"Errâ€¦" She pulled out her purse and pulled an ID out.

"Hmmm, I'm not really an expert on this ID, but I suggest you get a nonalcoholic beverage. I can have the bartender make you something if you like" Rico smiled and handed the ID back. He was professional to the fullest.

"Huh? But-" Elena interrupted her.

"That means he knows its fake Jen. I don't suggest you push your luck" she smirked and Jennifer pouted.

"A cola please" she suddenly said and looked around the room. All the teenagers chose a soft drink of some sort, and Jack chose a nonalcoholic beer. Ezekiel chose a single malt scotch.

"Ice or no ice?" Rico asked him.

"No Ice, as is" Ezekiel said.

"Never liked things watered down did you Zeks" Elena said. Jack was surprised she used his nickname.

"You know me girlie, I don't deal with crap. I deal with the best" He winked at her.

Everyone ordered their meals. Elena picked the herb roasted prime rib and lobster tail, Jack choosing the same as well as Ezekiel. Andy chose the swordfish and Jennifer and Maria chose the signature salad. Amber decided to go for a Filet Mignon with a split pea soup, and

Tyler chose a steak burger. Marcus decided to get the same as Elena.

"How's Farrah doing?" she asked him. All the teenagers looked at her and seemed confused.

"She's doing fine. She's been thrown to the wolves in a way. She's been turned into an instructor" Ezekiel said as he sipped his scotch.

"You're kidding me! Who's on point for the pelican wing then?" Elena looked at him wide eyed.

"They've got some new guy who's fresh out of the academy barking orders out of his arse. I nearly cold clocked him a few times when he decided he was going to try and order my crew about and stop doing their jobs to go help him. I guess he doesn't realize maintenance and flight crews are entirely separate entities when it comes to job specifics" Ezekiel scoffed and Elena chuckled.

"I got a message from Buck though. He's a Gunny now and off doing some such thing" he told her and she was astonished.

"He's not on the \_Honor Bound \_anymore? I thought he was with the 7th tactical?" Elena asked. All the teenagers were keen to figure out what they were talking about now.

"Nope, he got transferred to the 11th now. Got himself a few lollygaggers in his team now. They're an ok lot, so he probably couldn't do better." Elena saw the appetizers were being placed on their table, some Spinach artichoke dip and seared Ahi Tuna strips.

"Hmm, how come he never really responds to my emails?" Elena enquired as she picked up one of the Ahi tuna strips with her fork and dabbled it into the dip.

"Dunno. Maybe he's on a classified mission. Those Hell Jumpers almost always are, just like the Spartans. I was able to get one cryptic message from that one bloke, Dr. Wright through the Master Chief-" Ezekiel was interrupted by Amber as she spit out some of her soda on the table.

"You know the Master Chief?" she gawked at Ezekiel.

"He was stationed on the bloody ship along with Elena, Jack and I! Of course I bloody knew him!" Ezekiel said annoyed he was interrupted. All the teenagers looked at her.

"What? He was on the ship. Big whoop. I've talked to him like twice. He's an ok guy. He's a little-" she thought better than to tell them she saw the Spartan feeling sad about something or about her near rape experience. It wouldn't be right. "difficult to talk to, considering that mask of stone he wears-" Elena tried to finish but Tyler interrupted.

"He wears a mask of stone? I thought he wears that hel-ooph" he got an elbow shoved into his stomach by Jennifer.

"Please, continue" she said and leaned on her wrist, her elbow

propped on the table.

"Yeah, well, he tends to wear a mask of stone all the time, always ready for combat. He's a nice guy, though when I saw him he had the personality of a toaster." Amber giggled at her.

"So, I heard there were co-ed bathrooms on those ships. Did you ever get a look at-" Elena glared at her.

"Get your mind out of the gutter Amber! I had a specialty room on deck 2; I didn't have to use any group areas except the DFAC." The teenagers blinked at her.

"She means the dining facilities" Jack told them. All of them suddenly understood and with a non-unison "Ah" heard from all of them. Elena suddenly felt very put on the spot by her friends.

"So please, what was the message?" Elena asked. Ezekiel pulled out his data pad and handed it to Jack. He covered both sides with his hands and let Elena put a bone mic in her ear so no one, not even Andy could hear it. She touched her thumb to the data pad, and was surprised it still had access under her long thought to be deleted profile.

"Hello Ms. Esprit, is this thing on? Are you sure? I'm broadcasting yes? Ah splendid, splendid. Ms. Esprit! I hope you are having a glorious day! Em, I believe I said I would be keeping in touch in the future. I apologize if I have not been so forthcoming on my promise. Things have been getting a bit hectic out here you see. I do hope to see you again in the future. I know I have not been answering your emails, but as you see, oh, I guess you can't see it, but regardless, I've been quite busy. You see, oh, I should finish the recording quickly? It's running out of time? Well didn't we gain ace-" and it cut off. Elena laughed as she pulled the mic from her ear and handed it back to Ezekiel.

"Well? What did he say?" Amber asked.

"Classified" Elena responded and smiled.

"Bullshit it's classified! Spill the beans!" Amber thumped her fist on the table.

"Amber" Jack glared at her lightly.

"Sorry" she apologized and pouted.

"It's for her ears only" Ezekiel said.

"Didn't you hear it though?" Tyler asked.

"I read the text for it, not the vocal. She's the only one who has her fingerprints boyo" Ezekiel said, clearly getting annoyed at him.

"Enough with what happened back then; can we move on to something happier?" Jack said, ending the conversation about Elena's past.

The rest of the lunch went by fairly well. Jokes were tossed around, and the food was incredible for the teenagers.

"Oh, for the surprise" Jack said as Ezekiel kicked him under the table "I forgot. Oops. Um, well, you see we finished it Elena." Elena blinked a second before letting it sink in. She nearly choked on her food as she looked at her father with a gleam in her eyes, excited and giddy.

"You didn't. You did! You found the gimbal?" she asked. Jack nodded, and everyone else was lost.

"We've been trying to find a part for a pelican my dad and I have been restoring in a hangar over on Moffett Airfield. It's called a gimbal, and it stores the multiple thrusters to allow a pelican to fly without just flipping over. This one was for the left side for the small wing. Is it there? It's installed?" Elena explained and asked her father.

"Zeks did the welding himself. He even adapted the thruster vents for adaptive pulse. We've been on Earth for three days, so it kept us busy" Elena was practically jumping out of her seat as she looked over at Ezekiel.

"We got her painted up as well; eh, I think it's dry now at least" Ezekiel said as he finished his scotch and asked for a soda from a nearby waiter.

"You never told us you were working on a pelican! So you're part grease monkey part fighter pilot?" Maria asked.

"Hey, show some respect to said grease monkeys" Ezekiel growled and crossed his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes at Maria.

"Sorry. So, how long have you been working on it?" she asked.

"Three years. It's been hell finding parts for it, well, repair parts for it. Zeks has been sending us some things, but some of the other stuff we had to get through other channels like specific upgrades we wanted. We never knew if we'd get those things unless there was a donation drive of some sort" Elena explained.

"So, is it finished? Can we see it?" Amber asked. Elena, Jack and Ezekiel looked at each other. Elena shrugged.

"Wasn't gonna tell you guys this, but after we dropped you kids off, we were gonna take the fly girl over there and have her do the maiden voyage" Ezekiel told them. Everyone's eyes were on Elena.

"Can we fly in it with you? Can we?" Amber asked.

"See, this is not my fault Zeks, you blurted that one out" Jack told him sternly.

"Well sorry for you not caring if we tell them or not! It's not like I have to worry about zooming around in the air with a bunch of nabby kids squealing in my ears! I get to worry about the repairs that will happen if one of them flips a switch and screws up Elena's piloting! Oh look! That new gimbal you installed is broken cause some bloody git pressed the Admiral's doorbell!" Ezekiel grumbled and sucked down his soda.

"We won't touch anything! We swear! Please?" Amber asked and everyone else nodded in agreement.

"Wellâ€¦" Elena looked at all of them and then at her father. He put his hands up in surrender.

"Fine, I guess you guys can come. It's a cooperative civilian and military airfield, so be on your utmost behavior there ok guys?" Elena sounded like she was far more mature than the rest of them. They all nodded.

"I'm always on my best behavior" Amber said. Everyone looked at her. "What? Ok not always." Everyone still stared at her. "Oh fine, I'll be good."

Rico came back and asked if anyone wanted dessert, and they immediately told him it was Elena's sixteenth birthday. Rico smiled and told them he'd be right back with a cake. Twenty minutes went by before he finally came back, with four other waiters in tow.

"Ok. And a one and a two" Rico said. All four waiters sang happy birthday to Elena like a barber shop quartet. Their voices were in perfect sync, changing when needed, going high and low as they finished the song. She was smiling the whole time as the candles lit up her face on the cake. Rico took a picture for her and slipped it to her after the singing.

"Make a wish!" Andy said and she closed her eyes and thought for a moment. Then, she took a deep breath and blew hard, knocking out all the candles.

"Alright! Good job!" everyone said and Rico started to cut the cake.

"Hey Jacko, we still have the, you know, that?" Ezekiel said, making a nudging left motion with his neck.

"Of course" Jack said just as Elena was about to take her first bite.

"What did you wish for?" Andy asked.

"Oh come on! She can't tell you or it won't come true!" Amber said and threw her napkin at his face. He caught it and everybody laughed. Elena took her first bite as everyone watched then dug into their slices right after.

"Is this red velvet?" Elena asked. Jack nodded.

"This is the best birthday I have ever had" she whispered.

"I'm glad sweetheart" he said and hugged her. They finished their cake quickly and Jack paid the bill.

"Now, let's go see if the shit heap is ready for us" Ezekiel said. Elena scrunched up her face and smirked, punching him playfully in the arm.

"That's not exactly its name anymore is it Zeks. That reminds me, we

need to name the thing again" Jack said.

"What do you call it now?" Andy asked.

"Well she graduated to Hangar Queen a few months ago, but Shit Heap is still a close contender considering she was pretty obnoxious with installing the upgrades. She could have been demoted quickly these past few weeks" Ezekiel said.

"What should we call it?" Jack asked.

"How about Princess!" Jennifer said.

"How about Archangel" Marcus softly told everyone.

"Nah, those are wimpy. How about The Beast!" Tyler said.

"You know, I was gonna say your all muscle and no brains, but I kind of like that one" Ezekiel said.

"We'll let Elena think up a name for it while we head there" Jack said and looked at her. He winked, and she smiled.

"Oh one other thing. This is the small surprise for you" Jack said and pulled small data chip. He handed it to her.

"What is it?" Elena asked, confused.

"Plug it into Ezekiel's data pad" Jack told her and she picked it up and plugged it in as instructed. Elena's eyes went wide.

"You did work as a contracted pilot honey. You do get paid" Jack whispered to her as she saw an account with the payment she accrued during her summer. With all the events she had happen, as well as her skill in piloting, the amount wasn't huge, however she liked that it was 45,000 credits.

"What is it?" Amber asked.

"No way, I actually earned that? Seriously?" she asked.

"The UNSC takes care of its own for the most part, and considering you at some times carried hazardous materials to those bases, munitions, as well as that little thing you had happen, it adds up as compensation even if it was a short time" Ezekiel told her.

"You also did most of it with next to no need for maintenance required, which lowered travel costs. That factors somewhat in" Jack told her.

"Wow. I don't know what to do with it though" she whispered.

"Save it or spend it, you earned it with work you did" Jack told her softly.

"What is it? What did you get?" Amber asked again.

"Again, classified girlie. It's a special thing that's between her and us two. If you weren't there, you don't get to know about it" Ezekiel told her.



"Oh yeah? Well maybe she just might wanna share it with her best friend! Elena, don't you want to tell me what it is?" Amber acted sweet towards her.

"Classified. Are you an E-9 rank?" Elena asked.

"What? No" Amber said and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Then I'm sorry but I can't tell you. I really have to keep it a secret. You guys just wouldn't understand it like I do" Elena sighed and felt a bit sad. Her civilian friends didn't understand her like the people she met on the Honor Bound.

"Come on, we should go check out the big Hangar Queen. She's graduating today" Jack ruffled Elena's hair and she grabbed at his hand and pursed her lips in a fine line, trying to suppress a smirk. She smoothed her hair down after.

The group left the restaurant and headed down to the parking lot, which both the beat up red pickup and the new Hog were brought to them by valets.

"Hey guys, I don't wanna be rude, but can I go with my dad and Ezekiel in the pickup? You guys can follow behind us" Elena asked.

"I don't have a problem with it, just as long as you don't try to lose me" Andy smirked.

"No birthday girl in the car? What? Ohâ€¦. Fine, I guess we can survive for a few minutes" Amber said.

"It's an hour's drive from here Amber. Not exactly a few minutes" Elena chuckled.

"We should get a move on, the valets are looking at us weird" Andy said. Elena got in the middle of the pickup's cab and Ezekiel sat on her right. Her father slid into the driver's seat.

"There's something we need to tell you Elena" Jack said as he put his seatbelt on.

"What's up?" Elena asked and looked between them.

"Remember that old model maker from so long ago?" Jack asked her.

"Ummmâ€¦. Gaven?" she asked.

"Yup. We got a hold of him, and had him drive over here to help us with the paint mixtures" her father told her. Elena was astonished.

"It's gonna look great girlie, you just wait and see" Ezekiel said as Jack started the pickup and drove towards the airfield, Andy's hog following.

\*\*[One hour later]\*\*

The pickup pulled alongside the hangar and Andy's hog parked right next to it. Everyone piled out, and Jack walked to the hangar door.

"Ready?" he asked Elena. She stopped and took in a deep breath. She nodded and let him open the hangar door.

Inside, sitting on brand new quad paneled hydraulic landing gear, was the pelican. Its color was a matte dark black with grey stripes running down the body. The RORO was upgraded with a safety grid door that could be raised at the cargo hold's entrance so anyone who was inside could catch a view without falling out, regardless of a harness. The cargo hold was modified with an emergency pod launch system, so if the pelican took damage that would knock it out of the sky, the passengers would be cocooned in miniature pods lining the belly that exploded out and popped parachutes to drop them to safety, like micro HEV pods. Multiple other systems were upgraded through the craft.

Elena walked slowly up to the side of the pelican towards the emblem now plastered on the side, and most likely the right gimbal. Her emblem.

"I asked him to do it one last time, and we were lucky he remembered you. He's gotten old, but he still stenciled the lines for us to paint over" Jack said as Elena ran her hands over the emblem.

"Have you thought a name up for her yet?" Andy asked.

"Esprit" Elena whispered.

"What?" Ezekiel asked.

"The name is Esprit" she said and turned around, smiling.

"You know, that's a good name. Doesn't it mean spirit in French?" Ezekiel asked.

"Yup. I think it fits perfectly. It won't mean much unless she's flown. Time for her to get up in the air" Jack said and threw Elena a helmet.

She grinned from ear to ear as everyone piled on board the pelican just as she came on board, and she went straight for the cockpit. Jack followed her in, and just as Amber was going to join followed by everybody, the door locked.

"Hey, what the hell? Elena! The door's locked!" Amber said as she tried to open it.

"Only pilots allowed in here. Just sit back and strap in. I'll keep the RORO up and the safety bars down temporarily so you guys have to wait for the view" Elena said over the intercom.

Elena tied her hair in a bun then slipped her helmet on just as her father did the same, and started going through her preflight.

"Let's see if I remember how to do this" she said out loud, and Jack looked at her.

She flipped some switches and turned a dial, and the engines started up and churned to life.

"Atta girl, you could never forget this" Jack chuckled.

She went through her safety checks and still noticed no pad sensors were being tripped on the chairs except two, and she knew it was Ezekiel and Andy.

"Hey, I meant it when I said sit you guys! I am not going to be the one explaining why someone got a bump on the head because they thought this pelican was a bus!" Elena growled over the intercom.

"Sheesh, demanding isn't she?" Amber said.

"She's the captain, and we asked to come on board. We gotta do what she says" Andy said and as he strapped himself in. The RORO rose a few feet just to get off the ground, and then closed fully, the small window on the top dropping from the top of the hold.

"Alright, thruster check good, generator at one hundred percent, cooling nominal, Liq Hyde and Hydrazine is check. Let's roll outside" Elena said to herself as she flipped a switch and pushed her throttle forward. The hydraulic landing gear started rolling forward like a car, part of the upgrades they had installed. Most pelicans were pure VTOL, their landing gear only there for just that, landing. They would be taxied into a hangar.

They exited the hangar and sat outside for a moment.

"Moffett Tower control, this is-" Elena looked over at her father who picked up a com channel clipboard.

"Golf 3-3 running a civilian test run with newly christened D77-TC, how copy" she said over the outbound channel.

"Golf 3-3, this is Moffett TowerCOM, good copy, what is your request" Tower responded.

"Requesting outbound test flight with RORO open once airborne, heading 3-3-6 tap 2-9, making a roundabout for the view then dropping her to the deck, how copy" Elena told them and noticed she wasn't just talking outbound, but she was speaking one way only through intercom as well. Everyone could hear how she talked to TowerCOM. She was a professional pilot.

"Good copy Golf 3-3, request accepted, your authorization is code transfer is noted." Elena loved the new authenticator transfer system they installed. It made telling people who they were so much easier.

"Copy that TowerCOM, making the hop." Elena looked at her seat sensors and noticed only two were filled. She checked her camera and noticed it was only Ezekiel and Andy. She sighed.

"To all sheep standing around in the hold, if you cannot take your seats right now, I will assume there is an emergency parachute dump and will engage emergency ejection systems. You will then be launched on your ass outside of the pelican. After that, you're on your own"

Elena growled over her intercom. Everyone sat down and all sensors were green lit.

"Finally" Elena sighed and engaged her thrusters, and then while heading up into the air she pressed the safety latch button. Every chair in the cargo hold suddenly had its safety harness engaged, holding everyone in place as she knew someone would be stupid enough to stand up while she was taking off.

"I'm starting to think it was a bad idea letting them come for the maiden voyage" Elena told her father.

"You and me both" Jack responded.

The Esprit lifted off the ground and climbed to five hundred feet.

"Golf 3-3 to TowerCOM, we are at cherubs 5, heading to angels 1 in a few" she sent outbound and turned the pelican just to give everyone in the hold a look around.

"Holy shit, we're really up in the air! Elena has us up in the air!" Amber looked around at everyone as she felt the pelican lift up.

"All passengers, we will be stopping at 1000 feet in the air, you will then be free to move about the cabin. Afterwards, sit back down so I can land this thing" Elena said as she pushed on her throttle.

The Esprit ascended quickly to one thousand feet, and then flew in a shallow circle around Moffett Airfield. The RORO opened and the safety grid rose up from the floor, blocking exit out of the hold and keeping people from falling out from all directions. Small cables slowly lowered from the ceiling to connect to people's belts or mobile safety harnesses. Everyone watched outside with excitement as they could see the lights from all the buildings and the city of San Francisco in the distance. Elena slowly rotated the pelican around so they could get an astounding view. They stayed up in the air for ten minutes.

"Wow, it's cold up here" Amber suddenly started shivering. "Sheesh, No wonder you see pilots wearing those suits" Andy agreed.

"What did you expect at 1000 feet? Elena! Can we go down now? My tallywacker is about to fall off from the frost!" Ezekiel said over the intercom.

"Yeah yeah Zeks. Everyone sit down please, scenic view over" Elena told them and they all sat down.

Elena slowly lowered the pelican down to the ground carefully, right near the hangar, and then slowly rolled it into the large metal home for the craft.

"Ok, that's it, she's functional" Jack said as Elena powered the engines down and disengaged the safety bars. She unstrapped herself and got up out of her seat, which was one of three as they incorporated the newer cockpit model and placed the main pilot in front, with two chairs behind for communication or co-pilot and

weapons.

Elena opened the cockpit door and everyone rushed her and congratulated her on a job well done.

"That was epic! I swear, this is so cool!" Amber was giddy as everyone tried to talk at the same time. She softly pushed her way past them as they followed and she stepped off the RORO and observed the outside of the pelican.

"So? How does she feel?" Ezekiel asked as Jack came down the cargo door.

"She feels fine, no sensor problems, wobble was nil, float point was great, she purrs like a kitten" she said, patting the pelican on the side. "We did good dad" she said as she stared at everyone.

"Good, cause I have something to tell you. The big surprise" Jack walked up to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"It's yours" he said. Elena was stunned.

"Wait, you mean I can fly it when I want right?" she asked.

"No, I mean it's under your name. I put it that way for the pelican. You see, Ezekiel inherited this hangar from some friend of his a long time ago, but he never had a use for it. It's already been paid for; you don't have to worry about any rental problems. It's yours Elena. I sure as hell don't need it" Jack told her. She had difficulty standing and looked around at everything.

"Are you ok?" Jack asked worried.

"I don't, I meanâ€¦ wow, and it's mine?" she asked.

"Yup. Quite a sweet sixteen gift huh? You put a lot of effort into it, only natural you get to have it. Think about it. It's not like a boat in the water where you pay a harbor fee. You can go anywhere you want, just by yourself or with your friends. Only thing I'd suggest though is don't go outside of the atmosphere, cause the UNSC will ask you why you're there, and if you don't have a good answer, they can potentially shoot you down." Elena just looked at her father like he was going to break into a grin and say "got ya! It was all a joke!" but he didn't.

"Hope it's better than a car honey" he told her.

"Way better, by far" she told him and nearly broke out crying. She leaned into him as he embraced her in a hug as everyone watched.

The rest of the night, everyone sat around in the hangar drinking sodas and eating sweets and hamburgers. The pelican as well as Andy's warthog both had a decent sound system, so they were playing music throughout the hangar. Everybody mostly congregated around the RORO door, as Elena sat on a small couch pulled up behind it. Jack and Ezekiel talked to each other sitting in a pair of chairs near the door. The hangar was semi converted to a temporary living area, with a small refrigerator in the corner and a countertop attached to the wall with microwave and small stove. There was a sink and a bathroom in the corner fully equipped. A TV sat on a box in front of a leather

couch. There was a dresser for spare clothes if someone got dirty while doing maintenance on the pelican, and multiple tool and gear stands for tool storage and spare parts.

"This is incredible, your dad got you a plane for your birthday" Amber said in disbelief. Elena looked at her with annoyance. "Sorry, VTOL" Amber chuckled.

"We could go anywhere, see anything on Earth. We could go to Paris!" Jennifer exclaimed.

"We're not going to Paris" Andy told her.

"Why not? Why can't we? Her father said we could go anywhere, I think it would be fun to go there, or Venice, or Tokyo!" she tried to get everyone to agree with her.

"We're not going to any of those places because part of that idea involves Elena flying us there. She's the pilot, she's the owner of the pelican and the hangar is under her control" Andy said looking around "But it's entirely her decision to go anywhere with it."

Jennifer walked up to Elena and looked down at her as she drank her soda.

"Come on Elena, you wanna go to Paris too don't you?" she asked.

"I don't wanna go anywhere but home right now. I'm so exhausted from today, I don't even know if I'll make it to my bed" she said as her eyes looked droopy. Andy put his arm around her and held her close.

"Have a good birthday?" Andy softly whispered to her.

"The best" she responded and leaned her forehead against his chin.

Just then Jack and Ezekiel walked back up to them.

"Hey, we just had a thought. We were talking about this new piece of equipment that's being installed on the F-99s. It's a tracking system that can keep an eye on you and home in on your position in the event you need assistance on the battlefield. Well, we have one and could install it into the Esprit" Jack told her.

"Wait, what does this do for me again? We're on Earth, we're not fighting anything" she tried to think as she was very sleepy.

"If we get it installed, the pelican can leave the hangar on its own, track you down and land, pick you up, and then you can pilot it wherever you need to go. Once your there, tell it to go back to the hangar. It's a simple device apparently, but it's still fairly new. It has a set amount of travel modes, so to stop someone else from sending another signal to it. Want it installed?" Jack asked his daughter. She looked at everyone around her.

"It's better than any car you could get; you don't have to roll around on the streets! Just fly over them!" Amber said.

"We'd have to install an auto lock for the hangar doors, but considering the pelican has an ion generator, as long as it's not far, you could effectively fly without worry of fuel costs, and even then since your profile is still up for the UNSC, you could get it tapped onto a military maintenance tab. Hell, Ezekiel can still send down repair parts if anything falls apart, and you know what you're doing when it comes to maintenance. You could potentially have a part time job even by dropping things off since your profile is still functional. How about it?" Jack asked.

Elena sighed, and looked up at her father. "I'm going to scare the living crap out of my fellow students the next two years" she laughed and everyone laughed as well.

"Definitely an eye opener when a pelican comes down to pick you up" Ezekiel told her.

"Alright, let's do it, but I have to get some sleep now" Elena said and leaned on Andy's shoulder as he got her to her feet and everyone left the hangar except Jack and Ezekiel.

"We could do it tonight you think?" Jack asked him.

"Through the night? Are you sure? I know she's your pride and joy, but really Jack? We barely have any rest under our belts from the work to fuel her up, and now you wanna stay up all night to do this?" Ezekiel looked astonished.

"I have to Zeks. If I could I'd get her a Long Sword but I can't. And one other thing. Did you notice that black car in front of her house? When we went by after we left the AFB?" he asked the mechanic.

"Aye and it was unmarked to boot. What are you thinking Jacko? Someone maybe trying to hurt her?" he crossed his arms over his chest as Elena sat in the warthog falling asleep, the rest of her friends piled in the spacious back.

"I think someone is keen on keeping an eye on her not hurt her, and I'd like it if she had at least some way of, I don't know, getting away or potentially fighting back. Remember those ARGUS drones we were moving?" Jack asked.

"You don't thinkâ€¦| Jacko, think man! You can't just give her a personal defense drone and go "Hey! This is a watch dog with a missile launcher attached! If somebody sneezes wrong near ya it's gonna blow their face off!" You can't do that boyo" Ezekiel put his hands on his friend's shoulders and shook him, hoping it would get some sense to come through.

"I'm not saying keep the weapons, besides, the UNSC would track it. I'm saying remove the missile system and install like a Taser or I don't know, a tranquilizer gun system, or something! It would give her something to at least try and stop whoever is doing that. Can you help me?" Jack begged the red haired mechanic.

"Aye, I can try. Let me see if we have anything available in the shipments we brought down. I'm sure we had one crate of those flying Frisbees lying around once we unpacked. We'd have to drive all the way back to Vandenberg though." Jack sighed and looked at his daughter. She was almost asleep.

"Alright. Here's what I'm gonna do. We have the homing system here right? Can you install it without me while I make a run for Vandenberg? I'll get an ARGUS, detach the weapon system and bring it back here. ARGUS drones are used for multiple operations, so it's not like those things are just used in the military. I'm pretty sure I can get my hands on a multi round Taser system or micro tranq turret for it or something. I'll figure it out once we get it here."

Jack walked over to the warthog and heard its engine was rumbling. Andy had the heater on inside and was keeping everyone warm.

"Hey dad, what's going on? You gonna follow us home? I had an idea; you guys could stay at our place tonight. Milo moved out remember? You could sleep in his old room and Zeks could take the couch or something." Elena was very drowsy but still trying to keep awake for him.

"I actually have to do something kiddo. I gotta go back to Vandenberg AFB and pick something up. But I'll see you again on Monday ok?" he said and kissed her on the forehead.

"But dadâ€¦|" Elena fought sleep while she talked to him.

"It'll have to be another time sweetheart. Monday rolls around, I'll be there to pick you up from school, I promise."

Elena nodded her head and Jack closed the hatch door. The hog pulled away and Jack watched them drive off out of Moffett Airfield. She was so tired she didn't even notice he promised and didn't pinkie swear to her.

(Author's note: I did my best to get some research done on salsa dancing and the music, as well as the dance moves. Dancing with the Stars was interesting, though there were no names for the moves they did, so I had to wing it. I tried looking up the moves on different sites, no luck. The music though was another story. I actually enjoyed it quite a bit. As for the homing thing, it's already in UCAVs today. It isn't as efficient as what I'm writing in, but considering it's 500 years in the future, I think it could be overlooked. As for the ARGUS drone, we already have something today like it and it's mentioned in the halo background. The Lancet missile it usually carries though I don't think Elena would be allowed to haveâ€¦|)

## 7. End of Childhood

\*\*[0800 hours, April 23\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2547 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, California]\*\*

Elena woke up to a knock coming from downstairs. She woke up hazily, looking around and wondering what time it was. Her alarm clock told her it was eight a.m., and she nearly fell out of her bed as she tried to get up. She forgot to set her alarm.

"Shit!" she yelled as she still heard knocking on the front door. She ran downstairs and looked through the peep hole. Outside Andy was banging on the door waiting for her.



"I'll be right out!" She said and turned around quickly, wondering where her mother was. On the nightstand table near the door was a note:

Elena,

I had to start work early today, big plans happening for Traxus and they need everyone. Grab a cereal bar from the kitchen and make sure you take your vitamins. Don't be late for school.

Love,

Mom

Elena almost freaked. She ran upstairs and quickly took a shower in less than three minutes, and then blow dried her hair. She threw a bra and panties on then pulled on a T-shirt and jeans, grabbing her phone and laptop and threw them in her backpack. She ran out of her room then doubled back and grabbed a small data pad her father gave her two years ago. She ran back downstairs and pulled out a small vitamin storage container and pulled out Friday's amount, then quickly ran to grab some orange juice from the fridge and a cup.

She swallowed the vitamins and orange juice then grabbed a cereal bar from a box and ran to the door.

"Hey, what took you so long, we're gonna be-" Elena shot by Andy and jumped into his hog.

"Late" he whispered to himself as she opened the package and gulped it down.

\*\*[Five minutes later]\*\*

Elena opened the door and barely slid into her chair with Andy in tow just as the second bell rang.

"Ms. Gripen, quick entry. Slept in I guess?" her English teacher, Ms. Saska, asked.

"Was busy helping with a science project ma'am" she squeaked out.

"Ah yes, the science project with your group. Well, as long as you aren't late. Class is in session" she told her then started her speech. Elena sighed and looked at Andy. He smiled over his shoulder from the row up and turned to start his class work.

\*\*[Six hours later]\*\*

Elena walked almost dragging her feet out of the school. Andy had a football game so she wouldn't be getting a ride until later, though she didn't mind because she was going to watch the game. Marcus seemed to think she was the best thing since sliced bread since she joined the science team to help them out with building their own ground drone. She at first enjoyed helping them, but soon found it unsettling when they'd group around her and undress her with their eyes. She was going to have to tell Marcus she wasn't interested in helping them anymore.

She looked around for her friends Amber and Jennifer, and then remembered they joined the football team's cheer leading squad. They asked her to join, but she was still doing her flamenco dance classes as well as the science team, so she had almost no time to herself. She was barely able to get time to finish her homework at night to turn in the next morning. Now that her dance classes were over for the year and the science team was sure to win the science competition, she had some time for herself to think about the end of high school.

Up until today, she had yet to use the pelican for anything other than joy riding a bit, and she did it without anyone else with her as her father was running munitions more and more so she hardly ever saw him in the past two years. She had taken her pelican with her friends inside to the beach at one point, and gained authorization to land then let it take off, testing the automated return feature which she soon found worked very well. She wore a two piece light blue swim suit for the occasion with a light green sash tied around her waist, and during the bonfire Andy had given her a "going steady" ring. Unfortunately she was hit by Jennifer as she had snuck alcohol for their small bonfire and turned out to be an angry drunk. Amber tried to help her but in the end somehow thought it was better to help Jennifer as she was drunk too. Elena had to have Andy help her as both of the girls attacked Elena for some odd reason involving her not wanting to fly to New York.

She never took her friends aside from Andy or Marcus on the pelican again.

Ezekiel kept in contact but it was still uncommon if she got a response. Her mother was more and more working early and coming home late as Traxus was desperately building what it could to defend Earth from the unstoppable Covenant invasion that was slowly encroaching towards her home. They were already attacking the inner colonies, and she had no idea if they had destroyed all of the outer colonies before.

The end of high school was coming upon her, and she had already decided she would join the academy and become a fighter pilot. Her father was able to get Dr. Wright to easily sponsor her entrance into the academy. She simply wished her father would be there for her graduation. She was the valedictorian for the graduation ceremony and she hoped he'd be there, but his transport duties superseded him coming to Earth. Andy was understanding in her decision to join the academy and was willing to have a long distance relationship with her, as he was actually thinking of becoming a fire fighter. He was already going through prep training and his muscles were getting larger as he picked up heavy fire hoses in drills. He told her they might even transfer him to where he's needed, and hopefully he could get transferred to an area she was stationed. Then they could be together.

Elena sighed and sat down on the front steps of her school. She pulled out her phone and answered some texts she couldn't do in class just as Marcus walked up to her. She still had to wait two hours before the football game started, and Andy begged her to come to root him on as the full back for the school's team.

"H-Hey Elena" he said and waved to her, then sat down.

"Hey Marcus. How's it going" she asked as she continued to look through her texts.

"I-It's going great. Hey, u-um, would you m-mind if I asked you a q-question?" he asked her as she looked up at him.

"Sure, what's up?" she asked and stood up.

"U-um, w-well, I've noticed y-you've sort of been spending l-less time with Andy, and umâ€¦ w-wellâ€¦ i-if you're freeâ€¦" he stuttered out. It was true Elena didn't have much time to go on dates with Andy, but she didn't have much time to hang out with her friends either. Andy had recently gotten into an argument with her involving whether she could make it to his football game. It was either the football game or finish with the last piece of equipment to install on the drone Marcus was making. She decided on both, so she figured she'd call her pelican to pick them both up, considering Marcus was very soft spoken. They had stored the drone in her hangar. Then, once the equipment was installed, she'd carry it back to the school and send the craft back to the hangar.

"Hmmm?" she hummed out in question to him. He looked at her and giggled a bit.

"Um, I was wondering ifâ€¦ w-well, afterâ€¦ well, never mind" he suddenly said and just smiled.

"Ok, well, um, ready for the flight?" she asked.

"S-sure" he smiled and his eyes kept darting away.

Elena pressed a few buttons on her data pad and she saw the program run, calling the pelican to her position. The flight algorithms brought it hovering over the front lawn of the school, and she walked up the RORO without a second thought, Marcus almost crawling up it instead and following her. She allowed him to sit in the cockpit with her as she piloted it back to her hangar, then drove it in and automatically closed the hangar door.

Elena walked out of the cockpit and down the RORO again, and grabbed some tools as Marcus grabbed the parts they needed for the drone. It was a bulky thing, but it worked, and had a munitions lock system on top with a trigger wire that fed down into the machine, which allowed it to carry just about any man held weapon that had a trigger on it.

"T-This couldn't h-have been d-done w-without you Elena" Marcus said as she checked the operating system of the drone with her laptop.

"Me? I did ok; you made the generator for this thing, that's what makes it go. I'm proud of you. This wouldn't have been possible without you building most of the parts yourself" Elena told him and smiled as she loaded the operating system back up then disconnected from its side.

"I-I, I just wanted to say, that it's great working with you" Marcus said after a deep breath. He was staring at her as she bent over, looking down her shirt as she grabbed the left side panel for the drone.

"Well thanks Marcus, it's been nice helping you" she smiled and placed a panel back on the left side of the drone, and put the screws back in to hold it in place. Just as she stood up, he was standing in front of her very close.

"Um, is there something else?" she asked, confused. He fidgeted, then quickly leaned in and kissed her on her lips. She backed away.

"What are you doing?" she asked putting her left hand up to her mouth, shocked.

"I-I thought, I mean, since you fought with Andy, thatâ€¦ wellâ€¦" Marcus tried to explain. He tried to reach for her shoulders but she backed up again.

"I'm not interested in you that way Marcus. You're a friend, and I believe you have a gift for things like this, but you're not my type. I'm sorry" she said and stood there.

"B-but, we're doing the same thing! A-Andy doesn't understand you l-like I do!" Marcus said, taking a step forward.

"Marcus, I'm not interested. I don't have those feelings for you. Please stop, we're just friends ok?" Elena tried to talk softly to him. He backed up and looked like he was going to cry. He mumbled an apology and put his hands down.

"Marcus, please, could you sit down on the couch?" Elena asked him. He backed up and towards the couch and sat.

"Marcus, you're meant for a lot of great things, but I'm not going to be a part of them-" Marcus tried to interrupt "IN THAT WAY. I love Andy; we've been together for how long? I doubt we'll break up anytime soon, yes I know we argued but that was because he wants my support at his football game. I chose to help you out here and then make my way there after we drop the drone off. I've been trying to help you gain more confidence in showing these things your creating, not showing interest in you with my feelings. Do you understand?" she said softly.

"But I love you" he said, tears falling down his face.

"I don't feel the same way for you. You're my friend Marcus, but you're just that, a friend. You'll find someone, I know you will. Just have faith in yourself. Do it for me, please?" Marcus openly cried as he looked at her. Elena tried to smile to comfort him.

"I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry! I just, I just thought you liked me andâ€¦ I didn't mean to, I justâ€¦ please don't tell anyone, please" he sobbed as he looked at her.

"Ok, it's alright. I won't tell anyone. You're still a cool guy ok? Look, we girls, we're very independent and love isn't something you can just flip a switch on us and expect us to fall head over heels for you. You have to make an effort to see what she wants, not just you" she said and looked over at the countertop. Near the sink on a shelf was the diamond angel. She got up and walked over to it, and picked it up. She carried it over to Marcus and placed it in his hand.

"Think hard. Who have you seen besides me who has been nice to you? Any other girls?" she asked.

"Umâ€¦ I thinkâ€¦ um, Jennifer likes it when I help her with her homeworkâ€¦ and she hugs me a lotâ€¦" he sniffled.

"And she hangs out with you a lot because of how you speak to her cause you're really smart right?" she asked. He looked at her with confusion.

"Yeah" he said as he ran his sleeve over his cheek.

"It's ok, now, Jennifer does that, don't you think despite her being a popular cheerleader she might actually like you? You haven't gotten the hints yet have you? You treat her better than those jocks she hangs out with. You don't consider her some air head" she told him.

"You mean, sheâ€¦ oh my god, sheâ€¦" his mouth hung open a bit as he sniffled once, his tears no longer falling anymore. Elena nodded and tried to give him a warm smile.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I swear, I want to be your friend, please." Marcus was begging her to keep their friendship.

"Sure, nothing changed Marcus. We're still friends" she said. He nodded in agreement to his own question.

"Good. Now, help me get the drone into the pelican?" she asked. He nodded and slowly got up, then looked at her, who was just standing there smiling at him.

"Thanks" he said.

"Hey, you're not stuttering anymore!" Elena chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

"I guess I'm not" he said and laughed.

"You're also not looking at my chest anymore; you're looking at my eyes while speaking. That's good" she chuckled. Marcus suddenly looked embarrassed and looked at the floor, realizing she knew about that.

"Friends?" she asked and offered her hand.

"Friends" he repeated and shook hers with his own.

Once they got the much larger ground combat drone locked down on the pelican cargo hold floor, Elena got into the cockpit and Marcus slowly followed. He sat meekly behind her as she started up the engines.

Elena put her hair in a bun then placed her communication strap over her head. She didn't feel like wearing her helmet right now.

Elena tapped a few buttons and called out to TowerCOM, letting them know she was leaving the area, then flew the pelican right over the football field as everyone watched from the bleachers. The game was

about to start.

"Hmm, let's get this thing into the science wing and haul ass down there ok? After the game, ask Jennifer if she likes you. Want a tip? Don't physically explain how you feel with a kiss. Explain how you feel to her with your words, and ask her honestly if she could like you the same way. If she says yes which I'm almost positive she will, you're in the bag" Elena told him as she set the pelican down in the parking lot, people actually leaving the bleachers to go see the craft landing.

"Alright, let's go go go!" she yelled as she unstrapped and shot out of the cockpit, Marcus following her quickly and unlatching the straps.

"I can't get the operating system to load up, I swore we had this thing good to go" she tried to turn it on and roll it out of the pelican, but it wouldn't go.

"Wait, are you using the O/S with the patch we made?" he asked.

"Yeah, you said it would fix the targeting issues" Elena replied.

"Dial it back. I think the targeting is interfering with the traction control. Think about it. It fits" he told her.

"See, what did I tell you. Smart" she smiled and downgraded the drivers. He smiled and pulled out his laptop.

"Ok, now, load it back up, but we're going to attach parts of the patch in sequences. One" he said and the traction controls updated.

"Two" he sent the next piece and it immediately gave him an error.

"Found it!" he said and started typing furiously. He hit enter and the new code compiled. No error.

"Update complete. Let's get this thing out of here" he said and Elena nodded. The ground drone rolled out heavily and kept a brisk pace, as Elena and Marcus ran to keep up with it. They had installed a smaller homing system and path finding system into it so it knew exactly where to go to enter the science wing.

"Sheesh Marcus! You didn't have to upgrade the axle turn that high! This thing can keep up with a warthog practically!" Elena yelled as they jumped down a small flight of steps chasing after it as its modified treads allowed it to go down stairs easily.

"It's supposed to keep up with them! Oh crap, it might break through the classroom's doors!" Marcus quickly told it to stop with his laptop. They both stopped, running out of breath as it sat there, two inches from the science A50 door.

"Remind me next time to let you do the coding, I don't have enough experience" Elena told him as she gasped for breath.

"Can do. You do the wiring next time, I got shocked too many times" he replied, holding his hand to his chest.

Elena opened the door and let the drone roll in, then it turned around and it backed into the corner and shut down.

"We did good" Marcus said.

"No, you did good, I just helped" she replied, and punched him playfully in the arm. He laughed as they walked out of the door.

"Let's get to the field quick" Elena said and he agreed. They both ran to the football field after she locked the classroom door, and as they got there the teams were coming out onto the field. Elena started cheering as Amber suddenly threw a team jacket over her shoulders, with Andy's number emblazoned on the back. Marcus cheered as well, and Amber seemed surprised he wasn't stuttering.

"What the hell? You get him to stop stuttering?" Amber asked.

"We had a heart to heart, and we're friends. He doesn't have that crush on me anymore like you said" Elena replied. Amber looked between the two.

"You knock him around or something?" she asked. Elena twirled around in shock. Amber put her hands up in surrender.

"Sorry! Sorry, I'm just saying, no one's been able to get him to do that. Ever. Your heart to heart seems to work wonders girl." Elena was still a bit annoyed her best friend said what she said, but she ignored it and turned around. She was here for Andy. He saw her in the bleachers in the front row, waving and smiling. He waved back and blew a kiss to her.

"You get down and dirty with your man yet?" Amber giggled over her shoulder. Elena flipped around and glared at her. Amber just laughed.

"It's an honest question, don't get angry over it! You guys have been together for how long?" she said.

"None of your business. That's for Andy and I to know" Elena scoffed at her, and she showed her annoyance as she turned around and ignored her friend.

The game went well, as Andy, despite being leaner than everyone else on the field, was by far the fastest. At one point the quarterback threw a pass down to him, and he ran so fast that when he was intercepted and tackled, he still flew forward a good eight feet, landing in the touchdown zone. He got up slowly, sore from the small flight with a huge grass stain down his right side.

"Looking good babe!" Elena yelled out as he got up and looked towards her and the half time came. The Wild Cats, the team Andy was on, were winning against the Trojans from another school.

"Hey, you made it" Andy said as he ran up to her and she leaned over the railing.

"Wouldn't miss it" she smirked and kissed him as he climbed up a bit.

"Get a room!" Marcus suddenly said. Elena broke away and laughed at him as Andy gawked.

"He-" Elena put a finger on his mouth and smiled.

"He's got confidence, and he likes someone, and it's not me I'll say that. Can you get Jennifer to look his way?" Elena asked him.

"Sure, but why?" he asked, confused.

"Just please do it? I'll explain later" she said and gave him a peck on the lips and winked at him. He nodded and walked over to the cheerleaders, who were doing their cheer for the team. Andy walked up to Jennifer after they finished and said something, and Jennifer looked up at Marcus and smiled.

"See that Marcus, she's looking at you! Wave to her!" Elena told him and he obliged. Jennifer waved back. He suddenly had the same dreamy look on his face that he used to have for her.

"Told you! Wait till after the game, and then tell her how you feel. After, ask her out" she told him. He nodded and while Elena was standing next to him, he threw his arm around her shoulder and gave her a quick hug.

"Thanks" he said and removed his arm.

"No problem" she replied and they both continued with their cheering as half time stopped. The other team went onto the field as Andy walked out with his team and they huddled. Elena didn't know much about football plays, just that Andy's job was being a full back and to catch the ball the quarterback threw to him and haul ass without being caught. If he couldn't, he'd let Tyler take the throw as the half back and then he'd haul ass.

The game continued on, as The Wild Cats dominated the Trojans. On the last minute, the Trojans huddled up and Elena noticed that two of them pointed at Andy. She looked confused.

"Did you see-" Marcus asked her.

"Yeah, I saw it too. What's going on?" she asked him.

"I don't know, but Elena, I'm worried. Honestly. Something doesn't seem right" he told her seriously. He had a look in his eyes she had never seen. She looked towards Andy as the play started. The quarterback threw the ball and Andy caught it, and just as he turned and ran forward, two linebackers from the other team came at him. He tried to roll around them, but they didn't just try to knock him down, they dove and knocked his feet out from under him and he went flying intentionally through the air.

"Holyâ€¦!" Amber said behind her. Time slowed to a crawl as he sailed through the air, flying towards the touchdown zone, but he was still going. He slammed into the goal post at an odd angle, and then fell to the ground, not moving.



"Oh god!" Elena whispered and then bolted out of the bleachers towards the field. The referee blew his whistle as the medical team ran out onto the field and the two linebackers were sent to the benches. Elena tried to make her way to Andy as she screamed his name but the medical team kept her back.

"Miss, we need you to stay back" one of them said.

"Fuck that! He's my boyfriend! ANDY! ANDY!" She screamed as she was being pulled away.

She kicked at the man holding her and ran forward, Amber right behind her and so was Marcus. Elena slid next to Andy as he slowly moved his arm.

"Andy? How many fingers am I holding up?" the coach asked. Andy couldn't reply; he just looked stupefied as he blinked rapidly. They had his helmet off, and blood was covering his left arm.

"Andy? It's me, please, are you ok? I'm here Andy, I'm here" she said as she started to cry, seeing him in the condition he was in.

"I can't feel my legs! it hurts to breathe!" he whispered.

"We gotta get an ambulance here right now" the coach ordered.

"There's an accident on the road, it'll block us from getting him to a hospital. They're doing what they can right now to get something over here, but it's a multi-car pile-up" the lead medical member told him as he held a phone to his ear.

"Then call a medical air lift! Something damn it!" he roared. The medical team told him the air lifts were also helping in the car pile-up.

"If we move him the wrong way on a bed, he could have permanent damage to his back. He could be paralyzed" the medical member told him.

"No! ANDY!" Elena cried as she held his hand and brought her other hand to his cheek.

"Elena! ELENA!" Marcus pulled her back as she fought him.

"Stop! I have to be with him!" she cried as she finally clutched at his jacket.

"Elena listen to me! Listen! The drone! Think!" he shook her gently. She looked up at him.

"It has an emergency pull bed it can transport Andy onto! The top folds down and the weapon handles fold out and can roll him onto it, then carry him without any lifting! We get him on-" he didn't have to finish.

"My pelican and we can get him to a hospital right now. I'm calling it here now, call the drone here" she said in between sniffles as they both pulled their data pads and typed.

"We've got air lift coming guys! We got a pelican inbound!" Marcus yelled to the medical personnel.

"A pelican? I thought they'd send a helicopter?" one of them asked. The drone flew out of a nearby hallway up a flight of stairs as it became airborne from the speed it was moving. It already had their homing beacon and was zeroing in frighteningly fast, transforming it's top into a flat bed with a conveyor belt installed. The thing sounded like a miniature warthog, its large treads breaking through the field gate and sliding over a stop post with ease it seemed, and then stopping next to them as they pushed everyone out of the way and slid the sling around Andy.

Marcus engaged the medical carriage protocols and the drone slowly moved up to Andy and lowered its top to ground level, and the pulley slowly slid him on top of a plastic medical mat they had put him onto to stop him from moving onto the conveyor. After he was partly on it and groaning, the conveyor turned on and brought him fully lying on top of the bed. The drone rose back up and brought its treads in line just under it. Marcus sent commands to the drone to go to the pelican as Elena made a mad dash to it, and the medical personnel looked confused.

"Wait, she's the pilot? What the hell?" one asked.

"Marcus, in with the drone now!" Amber yelled at him as she got inside too and Marcus didn't think twice as the RORO lowered and the drone rolled up, keeping Andy perfectly level the entire time.

"That thing is definitely what we needed" the lead medical tech said as the teenagers got inside as Elena shot into the cockpit and put her communications band on. The medical team tried to go in, but Elena already had her safety bar up and closing the RORO behind the teenagers. They protested outside, but Elena really didn't give a crap.

"Need a hospital name now!" Elena yelled over the intercom.

"Uh, San Francisco General and Trauma!" Marcus yelled. Elena turned off the intercom and opened outbound as they lifted up off the ground and she immediately fired up the Esprit's engines.

"SF General and Trauma, this is Golf 3-3 from Moffett Airfield, do not ask for authorization because it is not medical we are military, we have a medical emergency bringing one male, age eighteen, wounded from severe impact. I need a medical team on your roof yesterday, we are coming in hot. I repeat; we are coming in hot, clear the deck. Emergency response requested how copy" Elena said as she tracked the hospital's com channel.

"Golf 3-3, you're not one of our air lifts, however permission granted, head to terminal C, a medical team will be on standby" the hospital responded back.

"SFGT I need a ping from terminal C, I do not know the buildings well; I do not have your air lift systems. I'm a lot bigger" she sniffled over the outbound.

"Understood, we'll have a flare on the ground. You said bigger, how

big?" she heard the hospital staffer ask. She flew in quick, sliding by a skyscraper and acting like her tail was on fire. The entire time everyone was strapped into their seats in the back for the roller coaster ride, the drone locked down and keeping Andy level with its tilt controls, as multiple roll bars wrapped around him and swiveled him on gyro stabilizers. She activated her spot lights as one landed on her from the hospital and she lowered herself quickly, bleeding her speed like she would in a fighter.

"Shit! You didn't say you were flying a pelican! I don't know if the landing pad is large enough for you! Jesus Christ!" the staffer yelled out.

Elena knew she had to get Andy inside soon, so she leveled the Esprit next to the landing pad and flipped around, lowering her RORO and dropping her safety bar. The RORO was on the edge of the roof, but Elena kept the Esprit steady and she was thankful for the adaptive thrust control they installed to keep her sitting almost still. The drone rolled out and onto the landing pad, not even a bump felt by Andy as the hydraulics, shocks and gel cushioning minimized any vibration. The medical team on the pad looked surprised from what looked to them like a combat drone ready to rip them apart with machine gun fire, but it carried a football player on its top as Marcus and Amber got out. Elena took her band off and ran out of the cockpit, telling the pelican to go back to the hangar with her data pad as she leapt off the RORO.

"What do we do? Is that thing safe?" The nurse in charge asked as the drone sat there.

"Get him on the gurney you idiots! He's got a back injury!" Amber yelled. They moved towards the drone and tried to slide Andy off of it, but Elena realized the gurney would still transfer vibration over the bumps between the elevator and the landing pad.

"Wait! Keep him on! Open the elevator! He'll stay on the drone until you get him into x-rays or whatever you have to do!" Elena said, tears still flowing.

"What? Whaâ€¦ fine! Let's get him inside guys!" the head nurse told them and the drone rolled forward towards the elevator. Marcus went inside with the nurses but there wasn't enough room for Elena and the others.

"We'll head down after on the stairs" Elena told him and he nodded, keeping the data pad ready on his arm. Elena and Amber dashed down the stairs as if their lives depended on it. They got out of the staircase section and opened a door into the hospital.

"There!" Amber pointed and saw the drone go around a corner. They both jogged to follow, weaving around nurses and doctors as they tracked it.

"MAKE A HOLE!" Elena barked as people got out of their way. Just as they went through a door, a nurse stopped them.

"We're bringing him immediately to the trauma unit, we'll do all we can, so just wait here" he said and put his hands out.

"But Marcus went in with them!" Amber yelled at him.

"He's coming out right after they get him off thatâ€¦ thing, and onto the surgery table." The nurse turned around and the doors closed in front of them as Elena saw the retreating drone down the hallway, the nurses and doctors following with a saline bag attached to an IV in Andy's arm trailing. The Drone even had a small hook that Marcus had installed to carry the saline bag or any medication needed. Elena held her hand to her forehead and cried, turning around as Amber hugged her and took her to a nearby waiting room.

**\*\*[Six hours later]\*\***

Elena was sitting with a small cup of coffee in her hands. She was staring into it as her mother sat next to her with her arm over Elena's shoulders, trying to comfort her. Amber sat to her left and stared at the ground. Marcus was sitting in a chair. Apparently anymore movement could have hurt Andy, so they decided to do the operation on top of the drone in the surgery room. Andy's parents were sitting in chairs, his mother leaning her head against her husband's shoulder, crying.

They hadn't gotten any information as to what his status was after they started the surgery. The only information was that Andy was in critical condition and he had multiple fractured discs. They were repairing them, but it was taking an incredibly long time for Elena.

A doctor walked out through the doors and walked over to them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Birken, my name is Doctor Jerald. Your son gave us some close calls, and he's out of surgery right now. He's still in critical condition in the intensive care. He had four fractured discs and two cracked ribs. He was very lucky to have gotten here without spinal damage. Who's the owner of that machine we did the operation on?" the Doctor explained then asked.

"I am" Marcus stood up.

"That thing probably saved him from being a paraplegic. No vibration at all, that thing military grade?" Dr. Jerald asked.

"It's supposed to be. We're hoping it'll be introduced and made to help the UNSC. It's a science project" Marcus explained.

"We hope that comes true son. That's a marvel of engineering. Now, I got told you guys came in on a pelican?" he asked.

"Yeah, that was me, I flew him in" Elena got up and looked at the Doctor. He blinked.

"No seriously, who brought him in?" he asked again.

"Doctor Jerald, I'm a certified D77-TC troop carrier pilot, and if it wasn't for me trying to save my boyfriend, your HELOs wouldn't have gotten halfway without hurting him further!" Elena growled at him.

"Whoa there, easy. I just thought you were faking. I just didn't expect someone so young to be piloting that. Were you the one on the communications too?" Jerald asked.

"Yes sir. Get a bigger landing pad built damn it." Elena crossed her arms over her chest.

"Elena! Please calm down" Elizabeth told her and came up behind, rubbing her shoulders.

"She's just emotional right now Dr. Jerald, she's worried" her mother told him.

"I understand and no apologies necessary. He's recovering right now and he's unconscious, so I will have to ask only immediate family be allowed to see him." Jerald turned around.

"Wait. If Elena saved our son, she deserves to see him! She gets to come too" Andy's mother growled out.

"I'm truly sorry, and I know what you must be thinking, but he needs to rest. She'll have to wait until tomorrow" he repeated and walked off. Elena couldn't think right. It was two o'clock in the morning and she was so stressed with everything happening that all she could think of was Andy smashing into the goal over and over again. She looked broken.

"Come on sweetheart, let's go home. You've got to be starving, and you can see him tomorrow" Elizabeth patted her gently on her shoulders. Her mother slowly led her out as Marcus and Amber followed.

\*\*[1400 hours April 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2547(Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, California]\*\*

Elena sat next to Andy's bed for the past three hours, not moving, just waiting for him to wake up. She refused to go to school today, and absolutely had to see him. They had put stitches in the gash on the left arm, and he was covered in white hospital sheets. He had a breather tube stuck up his nose, as well as multiple EKG wires running from his chest. He had an oximeter attached to his finger and a catheter in his left arm. A saline bag slowly flowed into his veins as well as a small drip of morphine. He was lying on his stomach to allow his back to heal. She could see the stitches and glazed glue covering the large incisions they made on his spine.

Elena just stared at him. She wanted him to desperately wake up and look at her, but he was still being kept under by the morphine.

She sighed and rested her head against his hand on the bed. She suddenly felt his fingers stir. A very low groaning was heard from him.

"Doctor, doctor!" she yelled out and ran to the door, calling for help. A nurse walked in and looked at Andy as a Doctor quickly followed.

"Ah, so you pulled through. We knew you would. They did what they needed to do. I'll just check on his dressings here" the nurse pulled back the sheets and checked his open hospital gown, as Andy slowly looked around from his odd vantage point. The Doctor picked up the data pad hanging from the bed and checked through everything.

"Hey, it's me Andy. I'm here" Elena stood right next to his head and leaned down, bringing her face right in front of him.

"Hey" he whispered and smiled.

"You scared the living crap out of me" she chuckled and brought her hand up to his cheek, caressing it softly.

"Wasn't intentional. Oooohâ€¦" He winced.

"I can up the dosage of the morphine if you want" the nurse asked.

"I think he needs it, yes please" Elena told him.

"Alright, done. Better?" the nurse asked.

"Much better" Andy sighed.

"Ok. I'll be just down the hall, let me know if he needs anything, you're call button is on the side of the bed just in case" the nurse smiled and walked out as Elena thanked him.

"I don't remember muchâ€¦" he whispered.

"You were flattened against a goal post. The other team flipped you into it. Your back was almost broken from the impact, and we couldn't move you well. Marcus got the drone we were working on to pick you up, saved you from being paralyzed from what the doctors have said. Iâ€¦" she explained to him.

"I flew you in. I landed on top of San Francisco General and Trauma and dropped the drone off with you laying on it. They operated on you for six hours" she finished telling him what happened.

"Six hours?... was I really that bad?" he asked softly. Elena could feel tears coming to her eyes.

"I was so worried about you" she could feel her lips tremble a bit, and then she kissed him.

"Hey, I'm ok now. Don't worry. Everything's going to be fine" he said softly and reached out for her hand. She took it and gripped it tightly.

"Yourâ€¦ your parents had an emergency they had to go to, something involving more lives than just you despite you being their son, and they told me they loved you very much and they'll be back in a few days." Elena squeezed his hand comfortingly.

"Shhhhhh shhh shhh, everything is going to be fine. I'll be out of here in no time" Andy comforted her softly.

"Mr. Birken? Andy? My name is Doctor Jerald; I was one of the surgeons that operated on you. You have four fractured discs and two cracked ribs. We applied a calcium hardening gel into the cracks, so they'll be fully formed in a week thanks to modern medical science. Surprising isn't it? Your incisions will be healed far quicker than that with an application of a special medical gel we'll swab on you each day, and polysporin. You'll be taking antibiotics for the next

month. After this week, you'll go through rehabilitation for a month and then you should be fine. Your ribs we covered in calcium sheeting so they'll heal in the same time. Let us know if you feel any sharp pains or muscle spasms in the next few weeks however" Jerald said and checked his incisions. "No infections, incisions are clean. If you have any seepage it's from your own body as a healing goo so to speak" he told Andy.

"Thank you doctor" Elena told him.

"Sure thing. If this had happened and he was living a hundred years in the past, we wouldn't have been able to do much and he would be crippled. You're very lucky you didn't fracture a fifth disc or you really would have been paralyzed. I have other patients to look at but I'll check on you each day around this time to see how you're doing. Keep your chin up it could have been much worse" Jerald smiled and nodded to Elena and walked out.

"Here that? You're going to be fine" she whispered to him.

"Told you. It would suck to sit in a wheel chair the rest of my life looking up at you instead of down at you" he chuckled.

"Can I get you anything? Anything at all?" she asked.

"I have what I need right here, but I could use some water" he softly said. She smiled and grabbed a plastic cup and poured some water from the trough nearby. She grabbed a straw and pushed it in, then held it to his mouth.

"You gonna take care of me every day? That doesn't seem right, it's supposed to be the other way around" Andy smirked.

"Like hell it is. Not until you're back on your feet can you say that, and that won't be for a while" she told him.

"Heyâ€ the prom is coming up, I won't be able to go with you it seems" he told her.

"Fuck that, I'm staying right next to you while you get better at home" she told him.

"No, you aren't. Go with someone, anyone. You should" he said and squeezed her hand.

"No, you listen. I can't go with anyone else but you. If you aren't going, then I'm not going. Plain and simple. You can't change my mind on this" she stubbornly told him. He chuckled and winced a tiny bit.

"Then I'll have to make the effort to get better before the big day. It's a month from now so I'll just have to will myself to heal quickly" he told her. She rolled her eyes and leaned down to his face. She kissed him softly as he returned it.

"I love you" he whispered.

"I love you too" she responded back and leaned her forehead against his.

\*\*[1600 hours, May 24th\*\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2547 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, California]\*\*

Limos were pulling up to the school as the girls were being paraded around like princesses, their hair done up with sparkles and different new hair styles and each dress extravagant. The boys tried to outdo the others, with specially designed tuxedos, some white others completely standard.

Just then, a pelican flew down from the sky, running lights on and hovered over the parking lot as everyone watched in awe. The RORO door opened up and out walked Elena and Andy. Andy wore a black tuxedo with a white vest and white bow tie, and white dress shoes. Elena completely out did him with a red Vintage Party Halter top mini dress with red Riviera heels. Her hair was in a messy bun, with the same makeup she wore to dance classes. Everyone gawked as her dress was much shorter than everyone else's.

"Pfft, slutâ€¦" one girl scoffed. Andy glared at her, and Elena turned around and decided to respond.

"Wrong, virgin, and a pilot, but it's not like you would know what either of those two are" she said with a smile, and then continued on. They walked inside and met up with their friends. Jennifer wore a white Jovani style dress that ran around her neck instead of over her shoulders, and she was holding onto Marcus, who wore a green pastel vest and black pants and his bow tie was a mosaic. Elena smiled at him and gave him a thumbs up. He greased his hair back and looked somewhat similar to Alonzo.

"Way to go!" she whispered to him and he smiled.

"I needed some help from a friend" he said and nudged her. "Oh! I almost forgot! We got it!" he told her and held her shoulders with his hands smiling.

"We did?" she asked and looked giddy. Jennifer was confused.

"Yup, we got the contract in effect! DARPA is going to produce the drones sometime next year, they wanted to add some armor plating but it is still the same thing we built! They didn't want to change much, as they usually do to keep costs down." He was beaming, and looked very confident.

"Well it's not like it cost us much, we built the thing with parts from the nearest hardware store. It cost us what, a few thousand over time? And most of that was sponsorship money or donations" Elena told him.

"All we paid was time and effort. By the way, you look fantastic" he told her and winked.

"You do too! Look at you! Nice bow tie!" she said and pointed at it. Her little group built slowly until they were all together and chatting, until the lights lowered and someone went on stage.

"Attention everyone! May I have your attention!" a teacher stood on the stage and held a microphone.



"It is time to choose the Prom King and Queen for this year!" He said as he held an envelope.

"It's Elena and Andy" Jennifer said, not even caring.

"Yup, got to be them" Marcus echoed.

"Well duh, not like anyone else has done what they've done" Maria scoffed.

"Elena Gripen and Andy Birken! Come on up!" the teacher said and spotlights shone on top of both of them, as two people came up to them and put the crowns on their heads and placed a bouquet into Elena's arms.

"Hold my drink Amber" Elena asked as Amber was busy kissing her new boy toy.

They both walked up the steps and stood in front of everyone as they clapped for them.

"Did you really want this?" Andy said out of the corner of his mouth as he smiled and waved.

"Not really, but just smile and wave and try not to pull a muscle" she replied and continued to smile.

"And now for the King and Queen's dance" the teacher said and had the DJ turn on a slow waltz.

"Are you sure you're doctor approved?" Elena asked him.

"Positive. I had my first fire fighter class again yesterday remember? Lifted both hoses without a problem" Andy replied.

They moved onto the dance floor smoothly like they were on water, Andy remembering the instructions from Alex as well as Elena in the past two years. He slid his hand up her arm and they slowly danced, every so once in a while Andy pulling one of the special moves with her and twirling her around him. Everyone was in awe. The dance finally ended, and she ran up to the DJ. Everyone was clapping and whistling.

"Hold up! Hold up!" Elena suddenly said and whispered to the DJ. She asked him to play another song as everybody continued to clap.

"Remember those moves I showed you Andy?" she asked.

"Oh yeah" he said and nodded, knowing exactly what was going to happen. They were expecting to get some dancing done tonight. The DJ put on some salsa music and they walked out onto the dance floor. Everyone watched in astonishment as they twirled around and stepped to the beat, as teachers were getting uncomfortable with the dance style.

"Fuck it, it's a real dance, they can kiss my ass" Elena said and flipped around, Andy holding his hands on her hips as she snapped them back and forth, looking in the opposite direction she moved them.

"Wooooo! Yeah!" everyone was making cat calls and whistling. One of the teachers fainted. When the music ended, Andy was bent over Elena in a dip, and her breasts were nearly falling out of her dress, though no one could see anything with dress tape holding things up. Everyone clapped and applauded, rooting them on as their crowns had fallen off from the quick dancing. Marcus walked up to them and handed them back, and they just looked at them and shrugged. He laughed as they sat down at a table, everybody complimenting them on their dance moves.

"Were we really that good?" Andy asked.

"You were dancing with me hon. Think about it" Elena smirked.

"Never mind, I know the answer" he said and winked at her.

"Elena, you're going to show me how you danced like that, you hear me?" Amber put her arm around her friend's shoulders.

"Take five years of dance lessons and you'll be able to" she replied and ate a bite of her Filet Mignon. Everyone laughed as Amber had a confused look on her face. After they finished their food and talked for an hour, they got up and danced a bit more into the night, much slower than the salsa dance Elena and Andy had shown everyone.

"So, how are the exams working out for being a trainee Andy?" Jennifer asked as Marcus slowly danced with her next to the popular couple.

"It's a little difficult since I've been out of the classes for a month with rehab, but I think I'm getting picked up for the 303 station. I have to go through a few more classes, but I'm positive they'll accept me" he told them as Elena leaned her head against his chest.

"That's great to hear. What about you Elena?" Jennifer asked.

"I've been accepted into the UNSC Air Force Academy in Colorado. I'd start right after this summer" She told them, then looked up at Andy. He smiled down at her.

"That means you won't be in California for four years though. You have to keep in touch" Amber told her, pouting as her boyfriend danced with her.

"Integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all that we do" she repeated the motto.

"Wow. You must have really impressed some people. How big is the place?" Marcus asked.

"There are only 1,400 cadets brought in per class. Only 1,000 of them will graduate" she told them as the dance stopped.

"Holy! so after, do they send you to, what, that school? What do they call it Marcus?" Amber asked.

"What? Err! Top Gun?" he said. Elena laughed.

"No, that's for navy and marine fighter pilots. I'll go to a similar one at Nellis AFB in Nevada. It's the United Nations Air Force Weapons School, and they don't need a nickname." Elena looked at everyone as they were surprised she would go to two different schools.

"I'm being sponsored by some special people to go there" she told them. They acknowledged and all sat down after the dancing.

"It's starting to get late. The prom will be over soon" Jennifer pouted.

"We have to take a picture of all of us before we leave. Come on, get together!" Amber grabbed Elena's arm and pulled her towards the photographer who was about to pack up.

"One more please!" she asked and he looked up. He grumbled something then got to his camera as they all leaned in and smiled.

"Cheese!" they all said and the camera took their picture, the school lawn right behind them with the front fountain displayed behind.

"I think our limo is here already" Jennifer told them.

"Elena and Andy, you're coming with us right?" Amber asked them. They looked at each other.

"No, not really" Elena said as the pelican landed right behind them. Everyone looked astonished as Andy smiled at them and cocked both of his eyebrows quickly, and then followed Elena into the troop carrier. The pelican lifted off and flew away, down to the hangar at Moffett Airfield.

"Did you have a good time my queen?" Andy asked as she flew.

"I did my king. I did indeed" she replied and landed the Esprit to the ground, then drove it into the hangar. They got out and took their shoes off, and flopped on the couch.

"We should get changed" Andy told her as he ran his hands through her now un-bunned hair.

"I know, but I don't wanna move. I'm perfectly comfortable laying right here." Elena was sprawled across the couch and laying her head on his lap.

"I don't either" he said as he pulled off his bow tie and slung one of the straps over the top of the couch. He unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt and sighed, then looked down at his girlfriend. She looked up into his eyes and smiled.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. I'm just gonna miss you, when your off saving the galaxy in your fighter." She could see a hint of sadness in his eyes.

"I won't be gone that long, and I'll visit during holidays. Think about it, you'll be waiting for a 2nd lieutenant to walk into your arms once I graduate" she chuckled.

"I know, but I'm still gonna miss you until you come back though. I promised I'd wait, and I will" he said softly, caressing her cheek. She looked away a bit.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I hope you don't mind, and try not to laugh" she asked him.

"Ok, so?" he asked again.

"Pinkie swear to me" she told him. He looked amused.

"See, I told you not to laugh" she pouted.

"I'm sorry, I'll take it seriously. But why do you want me to pinkie swear?" he asked.

"Because my father used to promise things a lot, andâ€¦ he used to break them. He only kept his promise if I made him pinkie swear to me." She leaned her head and looked at the TV, then the floor and the coffee table in front of them. A little vacuum robot zipped by on the ground, cleaning the floor.

"Ok, I'll pinkie swear" he said, and put out his pinkie finger crooked for her to loop her own around. She looked up at him and did just that, then sat up and kissed him. It was a long and passionate kiss, as he ran his fingers down her arm and held her close. They began to make out, Andy kissing away from her lips and down her neck, as she ran her fingers through his hair and leaning to give him access to her exposed flesh. Their fingers intertwined for a moment as he ran his hands down her arms and up to hers, before his hands reached towards her dress and slowly tried to pull it down.

"Wait" she said suddenly and pulled back a bit, gasping for breath.

"What's wrong?" he asked, looking at her confused.

"I'mâ€¦ I don't thinkâ€¦ I think we should wait" she told him.

"What, till we're at my house or yours? I don't think our parents would enjoy the moaning coming from our rooms" he smirked.

"No, I meanâ€¦ do you love me? Really, with all of your heart?" she asked, wincing a bit.

"Of course. I'm gonna be waiting for you while you graduate right? Why? What did you have in- oh. I see" he said and thought for a moment.

"I'm sorry, I justâ€¦ I want it to be special. I meanâ€¦ if or when we do it, you know?" Elena asked, biting her lip a bit and cocking her head slightly.

"Yeah, I know. Iâ€¦ guess this means I need to go find a ring right?" he chuckled and winked at her.

"What? You mean right now?" she looked at him with wide eyes.

"No, not right now! Ha-ha, I mean when you come back, I'll be here waiting, and the words ready. I know you feel we're still young, but I hope, soon, that you would change your mind. When that happens, and you are ready to, I'll say those words. I want to give you the time to reach your dreams, and I want to become a fire fighter. Once that's out of our system, and you come back, we can settle down" he finally told her. She felt tears rolling into her eyes and she embraced him in a hug.

"I love you so much" she whispered into his ear.

"I love you too Elena. Once everything is done, come back to me ok? I swear I'll be here. I swear this relationship can continue when you're out there" he whispered back. They held each other for a long time until they both fell asleep on the couch, with the TV turned on. Neither wished to go home and leave the other.

(Author's note: Squishy emotional fluff chapter here, things are heading towards what she wants to do. Don't worry, things start getting more action savvy in the next few chapters, trust me.)

## 8. A Father Fallen, A Promise Kept

\*\*[1000 hours, August 1\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2547 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, California]\*\*

Elena had just come back from the gym as she tried to keep in shape. Her dance classes were over and she had no reason to renew the lessons because she was going to be moving away for four years. She still believed she needed to keep in shape however.

She walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge to pull out the milk and opened the cupboard to get a glass.

"How was your work out?" her mother asked as she read the news on her data pad.

"It was good. I forgot my phone at home; did anyone call for me while I was out?" Elena asked.

"Hmmm, I heard a ring come from your room, but I don't know who it was. Hoping Andy would call and let you know how his vacation is going?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yeah" I miss him" Elena sighed and sat down with her glass.

"You could have gone with him, his parents invited you after all" her mother told her.

"I know" but I was still helping Marcus get that contract functioning, and he's now being accepted into Berkeley and has a job waiting for him after he's out. You know we both get royalties from that? I didn't know you could get it on military patents" she said and sipped her milk.

"Mmmhmmm, you'd be surprised what you can get if you own the design marks and technology patents. It isn't going to be a huge amount as tax collection will take a healthy chunk, but still, you'll see the number and be happy with what it is most likely" Elizabeth said as

she continued to read.

"Has dad called?" she asked her mother, hoping for an acknowledgement.

"Sorry dear, he hasn't. I'm sorry to say, but I'm actually worried he hasn't responded in a while—it isn't like him. He may be flaky on promises, but that he stuck to with a vengeance. He always called like clockwork every week at least once to see how you and Milo were doing in the past. Wonder if he's just out of range temporarily. Oh well, he'll get a chance later—" Elizabeth heard a knock at the door.

"Hmm, wonder if that's him maybe?" she asked and got up, then walked over and opened the door.

"Hey Elizabeth, is Elena here?" Andy was standing there in a green polo shirt with Amber next to him.

"Yeah! Hey fly girl! Come on out!" Amber yelled into the house.

"Yes, she just came back from the gym" Elena's mother said and Elena walked up and saw them.

"Hey! You came back early!" Elena smiled and hugged her boyfriend.

"Well, it was going to be really fun, but sadly during the skiing trip, my father didn't stop as he went down a path and he broke his leg. We flew back after. He's home right now on his phone calling people. I swear, he never stops doing business, even when he was skiing—" Andy told her and scratched the back of his head.

"Well, I'm glad you're back all the same. I missed you" she softly told him and kissed him. He returned the kiss.

"So, I figure we could go out to get some lunch later and see a movie. I saw Amber as I was coming over here and picked her up. You wanna come right?" He asked her.

"Of course! I just need to take a shower quick. Let me get cleaned up and get some new clothes on, and I'll be right down" Elena told him and broke from her hold on his neck then went inside. Her mother brought the two teenagers inside and continued reading her data pad as Elena went upstairs and into her room. She got undressed and took her shower, and then blow dried her hair and started to pick out her clothes. She decided since it was hot to just wear a blue tank top and beige shorts with flip flop sandals. She put her bra on and panties, and then slipped the remainder of her clothes on, hoping it wasn't too hot outside. She decided to put a bit of sunscreen on just in case.

As she came downstairs, she noticed her mother was standing at the door, with Andy and Amber standing next to her.

"Mom! What's wrong?" she asked quickly and walked up to the door.

"Are you Jack Gripen's daughter, Elena?" two Air Force officers were

standing at the door in dress uniform.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Elena was extremely confused. She looked at her mother who looked at her then back at the officers.

"I'd like to know as well, did something happen with my daughter's enrollment into the academy?" she just asked.

"I'm sorry to ask of this, but would you mind if we entered your house? We'd like to tell you this while you're sitting please ma'am" one of them said, and looked at the other, a hint of worry on his face. Elizabeth let them in and thanked her, then took their caps off and sat down with everyone.

"Alright, what's going on?" Elena asked.

"I know you are no longer married to the lieutenant miss, but I am sorry to inform you that your ex-husband and father of your children" the officer looked at his partner "was killed in action by Covenant forces."

Elena sat in stunned silence. Elizabeth was in pure shock. She brought her hand up to her mouth in horror then looked to her daughter. Her daughter looked empty eyed. Her father? Killed?

"He was transporting military personnel down to a colony world, and when they returned a Covenant Battle Cruiser had slip space transited into the sector. The Honor Bound as well as four frigates engaged the capital ship while the transports came back up from the surface. The cruiser fired two rounds that would have gutted two other pelicans filled with soldiers. Lt. Gripen's transport was not carrying any forces on board. He against orders flew to intercept the two rounds though he had no weaponry of his own. We do not have full information afterwards because the small fleet had lost two of the four frigates and the Honor Bound gated out to escape once the other pelicans were on board."

No one spoke. Andy immediately shot his arm around Elena as tears welled up in her eyes. He couldn't be. They were lying.

"You're lying, he can't be dead. You're lying!" Elena shouted out.

"Miss, I know that you think this is a hoax, but there were eye witness accounts to his pelican being hit. One plasma torpedo to the aft right gimbal vaporized that small section, and plasma fire was bursted into the cockpit windows. The chances of survival are next to nil" one officer said.

"But not impossible yes?" Elena growled through tears flowing freely. Elizabeth was crying as well.

"It's extremely unlikely ma'am. The amount of damage his pelican received was" severe. He sacrificed himself to protect two other pelicans, both of which had twenty soldiers on board as well as two pilots. He saved a total of forty four lives. He may have disobeyed orders to return to the cruiser, but the man is registered as a hero now ma'am. He's been posthumously registered as a Captain in the Air Force-" the officer stopped talking as Elena just hid her face in Andy's chest, sobbing.

"He's not dead! He can't be! He can't!..." Andy hugged her tightly to him, desperately trying to comfort her. Amber was hugging her mother and trying to soothe her.

"We're deeply sorry for your loss, both of you. The United Nations Air Force has lost one of its finest, and he will always be remembered for his sacrifice and bravery under fire" one of the officers told them, and pulled out two boxes, one of which was the medal of honor, the other were the stripes of a captain's insignia. The other pulled out a letter of condolence and placed it on the coffee table, and they got up.

"We hope that you will be able to move forward in knowing he is not suffering and is in a better place now. Our condolences ma'am, ma'am" they said, looking at Elizabeth, then to Elena. They left without another word.

\*\*[1500 hours, August 4\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2547 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, California]\*\*

Elena couldn't think. She was sitting inside the pelican's hold in one of the seats, just inside of her hangar, staring at the still broken pelican model her father had given her so long ago. Her mother was in mourning but still had to plan the funeral, so she stayed home. Andy and Amber came by each day to check on her, as she didn't feel like eating at any time. Her eyes were red from crying constantly, and had gained very little sleep. She didn't care about anything at that moment, and didn't speak much when Andy or Amber came by to see her.

She continued to swab different glues on the wing and hold it tightly to the pelican, hoping in some form that fixing the pelican would bring her father back to her. The wing would sit for a while, but then slowly droop and fall off again each time. She knew she should be planning to go to the academy, but it was a small voice in the back of her head telling her to do that. The only thing echoing throughout her conscious was one thing. We regret to inform you your father was killed in action. The condolence letter was lying on the ground in front of her. She had read it over twenty times, and each time she still couldn't believe it.

She looked up slightly to the small box with the Medal of Honor lying inside of it. Her mother wanted her to keep each piece safe with her. Each time she looked at them, she saw her father's smiling face looking back. Each time she looked at them, her eyes welled up with new tears she thought she had run out of. He was never coming home again, never seeing her for her birthday, never seeing her accomplishments. Never smiling again or hugging her.

Her heart was in pain thinking about the entire thing. She barely remembered to even get up to go to the bathroom when she needed to, she was so depressed.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry for your loss" she suddenly heard and her head rose. She barely cared if someone was entering without permission, and she just wanted to see who it was. Standing nearby was Dr. Wright.

"Iâ€| heard about the entire unfortunate incident. I did not expect



the Covenant would attack unarmed transports that could not defend themselves. The world has become so much darker without him around my dear" he said softly as he walked up the RORO and sat opposite of her.

"I know you are saddened by his passing, but is there anything I can do to ease the pain? In any way?" he asked.

"Bring him back from the dead" she hoarsely said.

"I'm sorry my dearâ€¦ I know you think I can change quite a bitâ€¦ butâ€¦ that is sadly out of my capabilitiesâ€¦" he said and got up and moved to her side. She didn't respond to his change of seating position and he put his arm around her shoulder.

"I have come with a few things to give you Elenaâ€¦ I know you are grieving for his loss, but here" he pulled out a data pad and tried to show her some information on it "there is a fund that is being provided to his family through a life insurance policy he had placed. It will support basic needs for you and your brother should you ever have need of the money. Also, the contract through DARPA" he pulled up another file "I had the chance to look it over. You will be provided for amicably for your efforts. The drone will save many lives in the future, I assure you. They are attempting to change it to provide search and rescue operations in space as-

Elena stood up and walked out of the Esprit and over to the counter. She started to cry again standing in front of the sink.

"It could be capable of saving injured personnel from damaged craft floatingâ€¦" he softly said behind her. He could hear her as she was turned away, heard the tears dropping into the sink.

"I know how dear he was to you. I enjoyed seeing him all those years ago when you were thirteen" Elena tilted her head slightly at hearing he knew who she was when she was younger "I have a secret to tell you I'm afraid" Wright said.

"Iâ€¦ let you on board the Honor Bound all those years ago. I applied the authorization for you to come on board with your father."

She suddenly looked up, and slowly turned around and looked at him quizzically. "What? Why?" she asked sniffing.

"Back when you were six, I entered that shop and saw how much you enjoyed aircraft. The truth however was that our aircraft and starships are no match against anything the Covenant has, or frankly against anything else that could be out there. I have been provided funding that would allow us to potentially even the odds. Please Elena, sit down and let me explain clearly my dear" he asked and motioned for the couch. She looked at him confused, and then looked around.

"What? What project?" she asked.

"Please, have a seat my dear, I can explain it" he told her. She walked over and sat down, watching him as he did the same.

"Now, the project I am working on, have you ever heard of the

Spartans?" he asked.

"Of course, they're super soldiers saving us from the Covenant" she told him.

"But do you know how they were created or work?" he asked her. She shook her head.

"Alright. I am going to tell you something that you should not let leave this hangar or tell anyone at all, do you understand? Not Andy, not Amber or your mother. No one" he told her sternly suddenly. She nodded.

"I tell you this so you understand fully, and can make a decision at the end. I will not confine you, I wish for a good outcome, but I will understand if you decide against it" Wright told her as he pulled his glasses off his face and cleaned them with a cloth, then put them back on his nose. She nodded again, tears no longer falling down her cheeks.

"Alright. The Spartan super soldiers were created by Dr. Halsey as you well know, and they are strong and fast and incredibly powerful, but not invincible. They were children, just like you were years ago. However, they were taken from their families" Elena's face changed to shock "and conscripted into the military, the navy to be precise. They were put through exercises and training to make them great soldiers, but even then they were still normal humans. Then they were augmented with genetic modifications to make them into what they are now" he told her, and she scooted back a bit on the couch away from him" and then provided another project, project MJOLNIR. Elena, please, calm down, you don't have anything to fear from me" he said and she settled again.

"Now, the Spartans are indeed powerful, but they are only as good as their environment allows them to be. We hear about them fighting on the ground, the good fight, but we always seem to lose in the air and in space. I aim to rectify that" he told her.

"What, through me?" she asked, worried.

"Yes. But not the same way Dr. Halsey did with the Spartans. I saw in you a dream, and I simply helped anyway I could to continue that dream. I am a Doctor of Psychology and Brain Sciences remember? I believed the easiest and most cost effective way was to not take you from your family, but to nurture your want to be a pilot. Remember when you were a child? You would get models from your father?" He asked her.

"How do you-" she couldn't finish her sentence.

"We've been watching you for some time Elena. We've been careful to look out for you so nothing happens to you. You're not an investment per se, and not a research project despite what you must be thinking my dear, but you are part of a greater research as a whole. However, we had to observe to see your reactions towards the stimulus. Think of it, if you suddenly stopped enjoying the idea of being a pilot, all the effort we put in to send you blueprints in the mail, packages of information or that data terminal we provided but you never knew who sent it?" Elena was wide eyed "that was from me and the project I am working on. We needed to know if we should cut our losses. You

though, compared to all the other children we are studying, are by far the most prime for this research" He said.

"So what, I'm some lab rat?" she yelled at him.

"No no Elena, please, calm down. You are no lab rat; we are hoping you are the next evolution of fighter superiority for us. Think hard, we are not doing to you what the UNSC did to the Spartans. You have lived a good life have you not? You've had your parents love you, you've had friends, and we simply helped you with your goal. It doesn't hurt us, in fact if the research failed we still had you become a pilot that enjoyed her job correct? You have everything to gain from us throughout your life and nothing to lose at all. This is why I have done it this way."

He looked around and spotted a cupboard above the counter nearby. He got up and walked over to it and pulled out a cup, then filled it with water from the cooler on the side, and sat back down as Elena processed the information in her head.

"This project, I'm a part of it? For how long? Am I a Spartan?" she asked.

"You've been in the project since you were six, though hidden under the radar so to speak. You are not a Spartan; you are a normal teenage girl with a passion for flying. In the project, the UEG provided funding for the observation personnel, the protection at times" Elena narrowed her eyes "Ah, yes, you must wonder what protection that must be. During your trip on board the Honor Bound when you were thirteen, you had an encounter with a Pelkin correct? The Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan-117 defended you as well?" he asked. She nodded slowly.

"He was under orders to shadow you around the ship, and provide safety should you ever come under stress or harm. During that time he observed your capacity for flying, as well as the reports we gained from your sim pod training and your flights on Reach. You are extremely talented. Not only were you given a vacation you enjoyed, we were able to see you in action, test you in our project without you knowing what was happening, and be provided a spare pilot to transport cargo around. Everyone was content, far easier than attempting to take you away from your family wouldn't you agree?" he asked. She nodded and relaxed slightly.

"Yes, you don't have to worry. Now, your father also nurtured your love of flying, but he had no knowledge of us watching you. The black car that you must have noticed in front of your house constantly was being driven by another Spartan, what was their name? I can never remember, I just know it was a Spartan, err, B312 I believe. Anyways, with your father's death, we believe a piece of our puzzle we have been trying to create has been removed. We did not want his death as much as you did not want it, and I am truly sorry for you. He helped kindle your love for flying and that made it so much easier for us to watch you" Wright leaned back against the couch. She didn't respond, just sat thinking.

"If you are angry I can understand; it is a natural reaction. We did not betray you in any way however. We did not violate your privacy directly, there were no cameras installed in your home, you did not have anyone rifle through your things, and no one invaded your

family's life style directly. You, as well as the other children, would develop naturally, though being provided what we could offer to fuel your want to fly. We can still provide that to you Elena. If you are sad, I still offer my condolences, and if you are angry, I ask that you not be angry at me, but be angry at the Covenant, for they took your father from you, not us."

Elena looked up at him quickly.

"You guys were the ones who ordered him to that colony though, didn't you?" she asked sternly.

"We had no idea Skopje would be attacked at that time. He was transporting food down to them, and suddenly one ship Elena, one battle cruiser shows up. The Covenant does not show up with one ship if it intends to attack a planet, they come in fleets my dear. Now, I ask you this. Are you still thinking of going to the Academy?" he asked, watching her face. She sat there for a long time, thinking.

"Yes, but I don't want to go right now. I still am grieving" she told him.

"I know. However, once the school years start, I sincerely ask you this. Please go. He would want you to go and prove your mettle there. You have my sponsorship, and I tell you this now, the sponsorship of two others as well. You have so much to offer everyone, don't throw it away now and give up on your dream you have. He would be proud of you going. After you graduate, and I know you will, I shall see you at the United Nations Air Force Weapons School. It will be a tough and grueling four years, but once you are finished, I'll be waiting with the continuation of the project. Stay strong. Alright?" he told her.

"Only four years but going to two schools?" she asked.

"The United Nations Air Force Weapons School course is only nine weeks my dear. The average human would snap if they had to go through such tests for more than that" he grinned.

She sighed and breathed deep to clear her head. She looked up at the ceiling.

"He's looking down at you Elena. He's watching out for you. He'd want you to show what you've got. Do him proud" Dr. Wright finished and patted her on the hand. She looked down at him and finally nodded.

"Splendid. Absolutely splendid. This is why I have done this project this way. You willingly join, not come involuntarily. You are committed and strong. If you had lost this want a few years ago, I would not be here Elena. I am on your side. Now, I will let you grieve, you have time. Afterwards, I would say you should get packed and ready to leave for the Academy in Colorado. I know you will do well" he said, and with that, he smiled and began to leave the hangar.

"You said there were other children" Elena asked him.

"Yes, that's right" he replied, looking behind at her.

"Are they going to the academy as well?" she asked. He smiled.

"Not exactly. They have the desire to fly, but as I said, you are the prime candidate. You are the only one who has passed the educational tests, fitness tests, leadership and my dear, character. The others will be going through other schools, though all are Air Force, so yes they will be going to academies. However, none of the others will be going to the Weapons School. They will be going through another school, though learning of similar piloting. They have all exhibited skill in piloting, thoughâ€¦ none quite as skilled as you. I must tell you though Elena, you are the youngest of the children, but by far the most promising" he told her. She nodded and he walked out of the hangar.

She flopped down on the couch and laid there, staring at a framed picture she had on the coffee table. It was the group picture she had done when she was thirteen, with her friends she made on the Honor Bound. Her father's face popping out immediately next to her young face, both smiling.

"I miss you dadâ€¦ so muchâ€¦ so so muchâ€¦" she whispered to the air.

\*\*[0800 Hours, September 1\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2547 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, El Paso County, Colorado, Jacks Valley]\*\*

Elena walked forward from her dormitory. The camp was massive, easily dwarfing her high school by thousands of acres. She was finally here. She looked around and saw multiple other cadets walking into the buildings. She had passed her physical aptitude test easily with no problems, capable of performing fifty pushups one handed due to her dance training. The examiner was so impressed he decided to put her in advanced courses, since she passed her educational tests easily due to her straight As and contract with DARPA acknowledged. He even told her she didn't have to start immediately with her BCT training, as it was already in progress, though she would join in the middle and be perfectly capable of adapting.

She had recently started her BCT training by other Cadets, but was still uncertain as to how she should react. The BCT training was quick considering she was not given much time to learn before the year started.

A cadet knocked her in the shoulder accidentally and then apologized as she stared, then realized she needed to get to her first day of BCT.

She walked in wearing her cadet uniform and sat quickly down for her first class, which was an engineering survival course. She was early, and other cadets were sitting around talking to each other, seemingly knowing each other easily.

"Hey, check out the new one" one of the girls asked.

"Isn't she a first year? Didn't see her during the beginning. She's going to be an odd one here isn't she?" another asked.

"Maybe she passed the exams with flying colors. Who knows? She's good if she's in here. Or, she's lost and walked into the wrong room" the

third said and they all laughed.

Elena pulled out her data pad and checked on her schedule. It was the same data pad that had her homing connection to her pelican, though she wasn't allowed to bring it due to rules of the school. She had to leave the ARGUS drone as well, and some other things, though she had her own room provided and didn't have to share.

"OFFICER IN THE ROOM!" one of the cadets snapped to and Elena looked up. Everyone was at attention and she was just sitting there, looking confused.

The instructor walked in and looked at everyone, then stared straight at her. She froze.

"I believe the correct action is to stand up and salute cadet, I would believe you would know that by now being a third-" he squinted and looked at her uniform.

"A pre BCT? In my course?... hmmm, I'll allow no salute this once, but you will be shown proper etiquette by your BCT instructor do you understand Cadet?" the man said sternly.

"Yes sir" she said and tried to salute. Everyone laughed in amusement and she felt embarrassed.

"Don't even try and salute right now cadet, I am already wincing at that painfully sloppy response. Be seated" he told her and she looked around as everyone took their seats. She suddenly felt very alone in this school.

"Now, Cadets, my job is to see just how well you all do after being accepted here. You probably are all going through BCT as we speak, and we studied the correct way to replace a damaged gimbal. As most of you know, minus one, from those other courses you were all in, I was the instructor for them. So, I will continue what we started. The gimbal for a D77-TC troop carrier right side, when damaged, can be replaced with what parts?" he asked walking around. No one volunteered.

"Michelson" he snapped a name and a man stood up.

"The Skyhawk sir" he said.

"Michelson, that was pathetic. Sit down" he barked and walked up to the front.

"Has no one read the proper repair and adaptation of equipment for the troop carrier here? It was a leadership test?" he asked. Elena raised her hand suddenly. Everyone looked at her.

"Alright, I do not know where you came from cadet, and I don't care, however I highly doubt a first year without the required courses would-" he was interrupted.

"Sir! The gimbal can be replaced with a GA-TL1 Long Sword Class Interceptor's Vernier PDE modified with dampening couplings" she told him. Everyone stared at her, including the instructor.

"Yesâ€| that's correctâ€| how did you know that cadet?" he

asked.

"I'm a certified D77-TC pilot sir. I was when I was thirteen" she squeaked out as everyone continued staring.

"How exactly did you gain that certification if you were a civilian?" the instructor asked.

"I apologize sir, but it's classified. I cannot tell you" she told him sternly suddenly. Dr. Wright told her if anyone asked, it was unavailable information and if they delved, to contact him immediately. He'd sort it out, or a very highly ranked officer in the UNSC would.

"Really? And why would it be classified?" he asked.

"I cannot say sir, and I was ordered to warn the people who classified it if you pressed further" she told him. He looked at her astonished, then blinked and looked away.

"Alright then, have you been trained in the repairs of the troop carrier?" he asked.

"Yes sir I have" she replied. Everyone started whispering.

"So you are a certified pilot and a certified mechanic for the D77-TC?" he asked.

"Yes sir" she replied, feeling very put on the spot.

"Can you cook as well? Oh wait, you'd say you're a certified chef from the CIA" he said, and everyone chuckled.

"Wellâ€¦ Iâ€¦" she tried to answer.

"That's enough Cadet, you may sit down. You've passed this line of questioning, but you're far from out of BCT simply because of that" he said as he continued the class.

She sat down and was a little hurt that she was attacked by him in such a way, but she figured this was how the military acted towards recruits. They would tear down the bad and build you up into what they needed. She only hoped they didn't tear out the good parts of her.

After the first introduction class, her next introduction class was straight to physical training at Jacks Valley. She hustled to the locker room and changed into sweats, even though it was hot outside. She attached the small belt they provided to her to carry a water canister. Under all physical training at the academy, they were supposed to be tough, but they would be well hydrated and if needed be provided medical assistance. She walked out to the group of cadets standing in line and stood next to them.

"Alright you nuggets! I don't give a damn how physically fit you seem to think you are, you are shit right now until I say otherwise! And that will not be until much later! Here is what is going to happen. I am going to give you orders and fix what's screwed up in your bodies to make you fit to be in the Air Force. What goes on in your heads is someone else's problem, but out here, I am your god! Do you

understand me?" The woman standing before them barked.

"Yes sir!" They all said, though Elena was a little out of unison. The woman stomped towards her and stood right in front of her face.

"Have a timing problem cadet?" she asked sarcastically.

"No sir!" she said, looking at her.

"Did I tell you to move or look at me? I did not tell you did I?" she yelled into her face.

"No sir!" she suddenly brought her chin up and looked straight ahead, away from the woman screaming at her.

"It's too late now! Drop and give me as many pushups as you can! I want to see what else is broken in that body of yours!" she growled and Elena got down on her hands and started her pushups. The instructor hadn't told her how many she needed to do, just to do them. She started counting them out, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. She made it into the double digits, making it to ten, then twenty, then thirty. The instructor eyed her, as the other cadets tried to get a look as she continued. Fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, one hundred.

"That's enough cadet. You can stop now" the instructor suddenly said. Elena stopped, but didn't get up. Her arms ached, but she knew how to get one hundred pushups done because of her dance classes. She also didn't want to get up because the instructor might yell at her for not being told to get up.

"You can rise cadet, I don't expect you to have your face in the dirt when I talk to you" the instructor said to her. She stood up and did her best to stand at attention.

"Where did you get your physical training from basic cadet? Most of these other nurkin heads can barely do fifty" she asked.

"Sir, I took dance classes before this sir" she replied.

"Really? Dancing? Let me guess, stripping?" she asked and there were small giggles from the lines.

"Did I say you could laugh?" she yelled out. No one responded.

"No sir! It was salsa dancing sir!" Elena felt like shit. She was being embarrassed in front of people she didn't know.

"Salsa dancing? You did salsa dancing? So you like to shake your ass everywhere? You think you're good at it?" she asked, sneering. Elena snapped.

"Yes sir! I believe I'm very good at it sir! And you do not shake your ass everywhere sir! You know nothing of dancing sir so quit while you're behind!" She glared at her.

"Don't you talk back to me Cadet! I'll have you running around this academy for the rest of the day if you dare!" she snapped at Elena.



"Unless it's true you don't know what you're talking about sir, I doubt that would be a good idea sir. What you have planned for me is nothing compared to what I've gone through the past five years" she glared at the instructor. The woman stood there staring at Elena as everyone held their breath. Elena was a basic compared to the instructor, but the instructor was a Sergeant, trying to teach her how to react and conform to the academy.

"Tell me cadet. What is dancing then if you're so sure of yourself. IF I get a sufficient answer, You get to fall in line with everyone else, no more questions. If I don't, you don't want to know what I have planned" the instructor growled.

"Salsa or any other style of dance is not about putting on a show for others, it is about putting on a show for your partner. You put your effort and skill into making your partner enjoy the dance, regardless of how well you perform. Regardless of how well you dance, if you or your partner does not enjoy it, then there was no reason to dance" she told the instructor. Someone in back chuckled, thinking she was full of shit. The instructor's face actually softened for a split second then hardened again.

"Cadets, you just earned yourself double laps around the Camp. First cadet Riesen, lead them on their merry laughter filled way" she said not taking her eyes off of Elena. Elena tried to follow the cadets, but the instructor stopped her.

"I didn't say you would follow them cadet. What's your name?" she asked her.

"Elena Gripen sir" she replied.

"Well, Elena Gripen" her face softened "that same response was what I myself gained from a dance instructor I had years ago" she told her.

"Wasâ€| was his name Alexander sir?" Elena asked. The instructor was surprised.

"Well, you seem to know the same people. That won't save you here cadet, but I see you understand what you're doing well enough, and I can definitely vouch for your fitness from what I just saw. I have something special for you. Finish it correctly and under time, and the only PT you will do is the gym and leadership courses. It's a physical education that is a free for all, and highly sought after. It is rarely offered, and very few get to go there. The remainder does what I tell them, and they do it with a smile. If you can complete the obstacle course, you can go for the rest of this year, but if you can't, you follow that group that just left, AND you have to catch up before they finish their two laps. Do you understand?" the instructor told her.

Elena was worried. If she accepted, she'd have free physical that didn't involve breaking her back and keeping herself in a condition she wanted, but if she failed, she'd be going through hell. She braced for it, and nodded.

"I can't hear you cadet!" the instructor barked.

"Yes sir!" Elena screamed.

"Alright! Let me show you to the playground!" she had a vicious look in her eye as she walked towards a building and around it, Elena following swiftly, not wanting to irk her anymore. The instructor, Sergeant Darrins, moved around the building and stopped. Planted in front of her, was the playground.

The first obstacle was a full set of tires she had to hop through, then she had to crawl under wires and around a corner, continuing through more wires then climb up a wooden wall. She would then climb down a rope slope and reach the bottom, and climb a tower. She would then cross a rope hanging from the tower to another tower, then down another rope to the ground. As soon as she was down, she would go up a ladder that would bring her to an elevated area with poles implanted into the ground. She would have to move through the poles one way or another and not touch the muddy swamp below. If she could get past all of that and get down the final ladder before 3 minutes was up, she as in the green.

"Ready?" Darrins asked. It was a rhetorical question.

"Go Cadet!" Darrins barked and Elena ran. She remembered her dance lessons and how they made her step on dots to coordinate where their feet needed to be to not step on another person's foot or create the right sound for flamenco. She moved swiftly through the tires like the wind, not tripping once.

She dove under the wires and crawled, pushing her way forward slowly. She thought for a second about how she could speed up the process. She then realized if she flipped over on her back and raised herself onto her forearms slightly, just enough to elevate her off the ground, she could push with her feet and literally crab crawl through. She flipped over and did just that, and she found though her un-protected arms were hurting from the move, she was moving much faster. As she almost got through the barb wires, she saw Darrin's face look at her in surprise. Her arms hurt now, but she was out of the second obstacle quite quickly.

"Twenty seconds" she barked at Elena. She ran up to the wooden wall as fast as she could and leapt, barely grabbing the lip. Any other cadet would have heaved themselves over, but she pulled up and flipped herself, landing on the rope slope and deciding to just roll down it.

She saw the tower in front of her and saw the rock climbing molds attached to it. She looked for the best path as she ran towards it, and jumped as high as she could to reach a good start. She then pulled herself up, going diagonal each time instead of straight up, and found it was much easier as there seemed to be a slight pattern involved.

She looked at the rope and observed what it was attached to, remembering when she was a kid seeing Amber swinging from something similar like a monkey, one arm shooting in front of the other. She decided against that approach, and started to balance on it like a high wire walker. She kept her balance well enough, and made it to the other side with little problem. She grabbed the rope that was attached to the second tower and realized it was attached at a diagonal angle to a railroad spike.

She decided it was best to grab it hands first and slide a bit, then swing her legs out and hold on with both her arms and legs, and since her upper arms were covered in her sweat shirt, she'd slide down the rough material. She slide down and dropped her butt on the ground, and then rolled out of the way.

She ran to the ladder just as Darrins told her she was at 40 seconds. She climbed up the ladder and glanced for a moment at Darrins. She wasn't watching her. She was staring at a stop watch. She had no idea how far Elena was right now.

Elena leapt and grabbed onto one pole. She knew the original idea was for a cadet to press their body against one pole and then walk your feet through the opposite pole, effectively acting like a spring to move across. She climbed the pole instead and leapt lithely from pole to pole, then slid down the ladder and ran to Darrin.

"One minuteâ€¦| fucking hell!" Darrins looked shocked as Elena ran up to her. Her forearms were scratched and bruised and she was out of breath, but she had completed the obstacle course faster than she had ever seen.

"Explain to me how the fuck you did that cadet!" Darrins barked in astonishment, then thought better of it and looked at the obstacle course then back to her.

"Excuse me; calmly explain how you did that. I'd like to know how you got through there in a minute" she asked.

"I thought outside the box sir" she told the instructor.

"You thought outside the boxâ€¦| how?" she asked, trying to understand.

"I looked for a different way to do what needed to be done. I didn't know the course well enough, but I figured if an experienced cadet did something one way, and I am inexperienced, how could I compete to gain an advantage" she explained. Sergeant Darrins looked surprised.

"And you're a first year? Barely in BCT?" she asked.

"Yes sir" she replied.

"You could have fucking fooled me Cadet Gripen. Alright, since this was supposed to be a graduation course, you've earned the right to the gym, but you will come back for leadership courses. The Shooting range is an entirely different story, and we will pull you out of the gym for those. Don't kill yourself in there, and I expect you to keep up with your exercises." she pointed at Elena.

"Sir? May I ask a question?" she said.

"Shoot" Darrins responded.

"The gym, you said to keep up with my exercises on my own, may I attempt to do my dancing warm ups? Dancing is a good physical training on all regards sir" Elena told her. Darrins smiled.

"Gripen, you sure can. In fact, I would like to see some of those moves you know. I'd like to see if the old coot hasn't lost his touch" she smiled and clapped Elena on the back.

"Thank you sir" she smiled back and saluted.

"However, this I'm gonna nip in the bud right here and now. Salute me again" Darrins ordered. Elena did.

"Pathetic. Pull your arm down. Again" she ordered. Elena moved quicker.

"Again!" Elena snapped her arm up and saluted.

"Much better. That's acceptable. Do that, and you won't have problems with other instructors. Look straight forward, do not make eye contact unless instructed or in personal conversation outside of your courses. Always stand at attention when addressed until told at ease. Then, you will take an easy stance with your hands behind you, do you understand?" the Captain asked.

"Yes sir!" she said and saluted quickly. Darrins smiled.

"Good, at ease." Elena put her hands behind her and widened her stance, her feet sliding out a bit.

"Better, much better. Those three positions are key. The rest of the Cadets will be done with their first lap by now. Go to the medical wing; get your arms checked for those scratches, then go to your next class. Oh and Cadet" Darrins smiled "I heard about your defense against Colonel Maddick. I'll put the word out to the other instructors to be careful around you and ease up. You're showing you can handle it here faster than most third years. That takes skill, and you have some the likes of which I've never seen. If you continue doing this, BCT is gonna be a breeze, and so is the rest of your education here" she told her. Elena saluted and Darrins saluted back, then walked to the medical wing.

\*\*[1000 hours, June 1\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2551 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, El Paso County, Colorado]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Two Steps from Hell â€" Heart of Courage]\*\*

Elena was going to graduate top of her class. She astonished the instructors in every way, finding ways to get around problems they gave her. Her homework and school work was almost always detailed, and her experience with piloting provided a view the instructors could relate to. She couldn't believe that she was doing so well, only that it was hard to keep up. She had difficulty at times to get enough sleep, though some of the instructors in spite of her intelligence took it as an insult they couldn't rebuild her as something they expected, to pile on more work for her to do than any other Cadet. She still finished it.

None of the instructors could figure out how to break her, she was an enigma. If they tried to confuse her with a social paradox, she would think up a way to change the paradox into something else she could work with. If it was an engineering or mathematical problem, she would look for shortcuts to make finding the answer to the problems

easy, but never cheat. She learned from others mistakes and did her best to not repeat them. During the holidays, she was allowed to come back to California to visit her mother and her friends. She spent as much time with Andy as possible. Even during BCT before she even officially started her classes, she had proven she was a leader, just one that didn't conform to the normal. Everyone respected her for that and listened immediately when she said something.

She walked down the steps of the school with her honor's certificate and diploma. She was officially a 1st Lieutenant by all accounts. The only thing she needed to do was go to Nellis Air Force base and start her nine weeks there for power training in air superiority. She wanted to desperately go home and tell everyone how she was doing, but her transport was going to be leaving for Nellis immediately.

The instructors had told her she was capable of leading, as during BCT training she had a leadership course that involved everyone trying to assert dominance over the other by helping the rest solve different problems. She had an answer to every one of them. At one point they were told to cross over a bunch of metal poles rigged to clamps on the ground and given planks. They had to get everyone over the poles and to the other side, in any way they could. She asked the instructors "Any way we find?" and they acknowledged. You could not move around the "building" the poles created, you had to go through it to the other side. Most Cadets would have built bridges on top, having everyone scrunch up together on one side and move the planks to continue. She unscrewed the pole clamps and let them fall down, then lay them next to each other and placed the planks on top. Everyone walked over in less than five minutes, though there wasn't a timer.

"I'm telling you, he's not fit to fly. He was stupid getting drunk last night" she could hear as she walked towards the landing pad for the pelicans heading outbound.

"Fucking hell! We can't get our hands on another registered pilot this soon" he's getting reprimanded, just you wait" an officer snapped nearby a 2nd Lieutenant. They were standing near the pelican she was supposed to be in, a D77H-TCI model that wasn't widely available yet as it was being tested. She still knew about the cockpit upgrade, as her Esprit was equipped with it, though she did not have the holographic panel used for A.I.s as she didn't need it. She didn't have an A.I. to insert into it and frankly wouldn't like having an artificial intelligence hound her flying telling her she couldn't do something.

"Sir, what seems to be the problem?" Elena spoke up behind them. Both of them turned around.

"I'll tell you what the problem is Lieutenant. One of our pilots who have now been trained in the new upgraded pelicans was caught intoxicated and got into a fight. He's now in the brig. We unfortunately don't have anyone trained in the new cockpit variation, just the older models" he told her.

"I am actually certified for both models sir" she told him and he gawked at her.

"Wait a minute, I know you! You're the" well I'll be, I didn't

think you'd be the one to be on this transport. Lt. Gripen, I know you have the credentials for flying it but I have to ask simply one question to let you have a yes or a no. How many flight hours and simulation hours do you have under your belt?" he asked smiling.

"In this model or the previous one sir?" she answered his question with her own question.

"This model" he replied.

"I own a modified civilian pelican with this cockpit variation sir. I've flown it for two years, though it had far more creature comforts than I installed for ease of flight like adaptive thrust control." The officer blinked and the 2nd Lieutenant whistled.

"I'll take that as over the requirements needed Lt. Gripen. Would you be interested in flying her to Nellis for the other transfers?" the officer asked.

"Sir! Yes sir! It would be my honor sir!" She saluted crisply and he returned the salute.

"Good, go get a flight suit on in the changing room and get inside it, do your preflight checks and get it ready for takeoff. The other personnel will come out shortly" he told her then walked off followed by the 2nd Lieutenant.

She did a small fist pump in the air and looked around hoping no one had noticed her do it, then ran as quickly as her shoes would allow her to the changing room. Once she emerged, her hair was tied in a bun as the academy did not require shaving or cutting it. The Air Force was just that, in the air. As long as the hair was kept contained during flying, they didn't care.

She walked out to the pelican and got inside, then opened the cockpit. Just as she did so, other Lieutenants were walking towards the pelican. She got inside and closed the door, then put her helmet on.

"I heard the pilot got trashed the other nightâ€¦ wonder who they got to fly this thing, maybe I could take a crack at it?" someone said.

"Are you kidding me Davis? We'd be smashed into a mountainside with you behind the controls of a pelican. Stick to Long Swords pal. Hey, we're missing someone aren't we? There's a seat not filled" someone else asked.

"Oh well, we're on time and the pelican seems ready to take off, guess they're being left behind or somethingâ€¦ wait, isn't it that goody two shoes, what's her name, Elena? Huh, would have expected her to make it here on time and already strapped in before usâ€¦ strange" the first person, Davis replied.

"Wonder if she's staying behind or something. Eh, whatever, hope this flight is easy going."

Elena smirked and did her preflight quickly without a problem, then lifted the RORO and called ahead to the Academy Flight Tower. She then called to Nellis AFB and told them they were on their way, then

slowly flew up away from the landing pad.

\*\*[1000 hours, August 5\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2551 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada]\*\*

She was out. She was finally out. She had a Long Sword assigned to her and would be transported to a new destination, but she didn't have to go with it until later. She could finally go see her family after so long.

Elena packed her things up and zipped her duffels, then picked them up and walked out of her dorm. She nodded to multiple personnel who addressed her, then continued on towards the exfil room where she would have a pelican land, pick her up, and take her home. She didn't have to fly this time even, so she could relax and sit back while someone else flew for her. She looked up out the window and could see other fighters running training operations and grinned. She was an official fighter pilot now. She had come a long way and now she could do what she dreamed of.

"Hey Ghost, we have a message for you" one of the flight instructors came up to her and handed her a data pad.

"For me? But I'm heading out right now, who is it?" she asked.

"Dunno, it's encrypted with high security clearance and your eyes only. You're no longer stationed here, so what happens after is not our concern Lieutenant. Stay safe" the instructor said and smiled, then walked away. She smiled back then looked at the data pad.

Elena,

Meet me at the front gates. There has been a change of plans.

-Dr. Wright

Elena looked confused. She was supposed to be leaving soon, wasn't she? She picked up her bags and walked back the way she came, through multiple hallways and out to the front. The heat was sweltering and she was immediately hit with a blast of hot air as she exited the building. In front of the gates was a limo with escort. She squinted through the blazing sun and even with her cap on, she could barely see them. She walked quickly towards the gates as they opened for her, and a guard opened the door to the limo.

"Hello my dear, I apologize for this change in scheduling, but I must ask you get inside. I hope you will, it is air conditioned in here and I can already tell the outside is not a comfortable environment" Dr. Wright told her from inside the limo. She looked around a bit then handed her bags to the driver, who put them into the trunk as she slipped inside.

"What's happening? I'm supposed to be getting on a pelican to head back to San Francisco, why was it delayed?" She asked.

"We're continuing the project. I have a go ahead from Dr. Halsey to use some of her research. I am going to ask you now, do you trust me?" Dr. Wright asked. She looked out the window then back to

him.

"What? Wha, why are you asking that? I mean, you've been helping me out for the past four years and-"

"Do you trust me Elena?" Dr. Wright asked her again. She stared at him trying to read his face.

"I don't understand. You said you wouldn't lie to me or hold back secrets if it involved me, why are you asking me that? Fine, yes, I trust you" she finally answered.

"Then I apologize my dear, but you will not be going back to California just yet. There is a pelican that will take you to a different planet all together. I know you miss your family right now, but we must step up this project further. Unfortunately, you are the only one I have funding for to provide the next step. I wish I had more, and hopefully once you have shown what you are capable of after some augments-" Elena looked at him wide eyed.

"What augments? You said I wasn't a Spartan, what the hell?" She backed away from him down the limo.

"Please Elena; you don't need to be afraid of me. You said you trusted me yes? I'm going to tell you they are not the same augments that a Spartan gains, but they are close in a way. They will further improve your flying capability. We have been working on them for some time, and with Dr. Halsey's research into augmenting Spartans to be quicker and more resistant to the damage of the skeleton, we believe we can further increase your efficacy, as well as some small cybernetic augments." She looked at him like he was crazy.

"If you are worried we are going to turn you into some, I don't know, freak, you should not be. All of the implants and augmentations will be seamless to your body. Almost all of it will be internal, some modifications. We've done quite a bit of research on this, and you do not need to worry. It has been perfected we believe. I ask you to accept this last operation before you come back. Please Elena; what do I have to gain from hurting you?" He told her. She looked between him and the guard sitting nearby. She figured she could easily neutralize both the guard and Dr. Wright and escape, but then she realized she was in the middle of the desert traveling at high speeds, and then there were the escort warthogs. She sighed.

"Alrightâ€¦ I guess I'm still your guinea pig since you got me through the schoolsâ€¦" she told him. He tried to put his hand on her hand, and she pulled back.

"You are not my guinea pig Elena, you are going to be proof that a pilot can be further capable of handling even worse situations than before and come out alive, and without any change of how you look. The Spartans, though they are strong and fast, have beenâ€¦ changed with the augmentations they were given. They are taller and more muscular and it helps them in their role as super soldiers. But they are looked upon asâ€¦ not really human. I feel sorry for them, but you, you are a pilot. You lived a civilian life before all of this, and you should be allowed to go back to it eventually. The aesthetic problems are eliminated, aside from a slight change to your neural interface when we get there." Dr. Wright tried to smile at her in a



comforting way, and she breathed deep.

"So where are we going? Reach?" she asked.

"No, I'm afraid where we're going is much farther away. I know you don't like this, and frankly, I wished I could give you the time to go see your family and-" she interrupted him quickly.

"Then why not let me see them? Look, I'll go, I'll do this, but please, I justâ€¦. I haven't seen them in how long? I can't just disappear and not tell them somethingâ€¦ you said you wanted me to be able to go back to a civilian life eventually, when things are quieter. I need to keep my ties with my family well taken care of Dr. Wright. Iâ€¦ I need to see themâ€¦ I miss themâ€¦" she told him and looked down at her pocket. She was carrying her broken pelican model inside.

"We can stop there temporarily, and you can tell them you are fine. I believe a deviation of the flight could be allowed for this. We'll be there in an hour" he told her, and she looked confused. Just then, she heard a CLUNK! As mag locks attached to the top of the limo and she felt an up and forward motion as she slid somewhat in the limo.

"What theâ€¦ did we just get air lifted?" she asked and looked out the window.

"Indeed Ms. Gripen, indeed. Don't worry, we'll be there soon to talk to your family" Dr. Wright pushed his glasses up his nose and sat back, grabbing a small bottle of water and drinking it down. He opened the small cooler and offered a drink for her as well, and she accepted.

\*\*[1130 hours, August 5\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2551 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco, California]\*\*

Elena knocked on the front door. It opened and her mother stood there, staring at her daughter.

"Hey mom!" She smiled and her mother laughed and hugged her. They had called ahead and asked for Andy and Amber to come over so she didn't have to move between different homes. Andy and Amber were right behind her mother.

"Look at you! All spit shined and ready to serve!" She pulled back and looked at her daughter. She pulled on the ribbons on her chest and poked at her dress cap.

"Hey there fly girl! Still causing the Cadets some trouble?" Amber giggled out as she went to hug her friend.

"Actually, I graduated the academy nine weeks ago Amber. I'm a 1st Lieutenant and certified Long Sword Fight pilot" Elena said over her shoulder as she hugged her back.

"Really? Wow, so, you're really an officer now?" Amber asked as she pulled back and looked her up and down.

"Yup, officer of the United Nations Air Force." She stood straight and at attention, though she was smiling.

Amber saluted her with respect and giggled, as Elena just laughed.

"What?" Amber looked confused.

"That's the slowest salute I've ever seen Amber, but of course you wouldn't know. It's good to see you again" Elena contained her laugh and saluted crisply. Amber looked impressed, and backed up as Andy came forward.

"Hey" he said softly.

"Hey" she answered back and hugged him, then gave him a kiss.

"So you're back? Really back now?" he asked her with a smile on his face. She frowned and looked away.

"I see, more training I guess. Well, you're almost done right?" he asked her.

"Andyâ€¦ Iâ€¦ can we go inside and-" she looked behind her and saw Dr. Wright shake his head and point at his watch "damn itâ€¦ I need to tell you all something. Iâ€¦ I'm not going to be on Earth for a bit" she told them. They looked at each other then looked back at her.

"Ok, so, you're being stationed somewhere else right? You'll come back correct?" her mother asked.

"Yeah, eventuallyâ€¦ but I don't know when that will beâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I can't tell you where I'm going. I'm not allowed. I'm gonna miss you" Elena felt tears welling up in her eyes. Her mother nodded and gave her a warm smile and hugged her close.

"Stay safe sweetheart, I know you'll do us proud" she whispered. Amber walked up to her.

"I'm not gonna have anyone to go to the beach with to get a sun tan for a while am I?" she asked. Elena shook her head.

"Eh, I guess I've grown out of that anywaysâ€¦ besides, a bit difficult to do it without my soon to be husband isn't it?" She smiled and looked up at Elena. Elena gawked and looked as she put up her hand and on it was an engagement ring.

"You didn't tell me over the phone!" She squealed and Amber giggled.

"I know! I had to tell you in person, he asked me a few weeks ago. The marriage isn't gonna be for a bit though. Greg has a lot of work right now on his plate, and apparently my acceptance into the CIA is going to slow me down a bit too" she smirked. Elena was flabbergasted.

"You've been holding out on me!" Elena almost snapped at her, but with a smile on her face.

"I know I know! I just got accepted yesterday! If I pass, I can be a chef anywhere I want! Even open up my own restaurant!" she told her

friend.

"I'm happy for you" Elena beamed.

"Thanks fly girl" they giggled together.

Elena looked over her shoulder as Dr. Wright motioned for her to come.

"Iâ€¦ I have to goâ€¦" she suddenly looked very sad, and looked up at Andy.

"I understand. Come back safe to me ok?" he told her and she nodded, and then leaned in for a kiss. She then faced her mother.

"Oh, you're father would be so proud of you" Elizabeth was almost crying and hugged her close.

"I know mom. I know. I love you mom" she whispered as her mother embraced her.

"I love you too sweetheart. Stay safe" she whispered to her daughter as she pulled away, then stood at attention and saluted them. She hesitated for a moment, then turned on her heel and walked to the limo.

"I love you Elena Gripen" Andy yelled out. She turned around and smiled at him.

"I love you too Andy Birken" she could almost feel the tears falling down her face, and then she turned back and got inside the limo.

\*\*[0600 hours, August 20\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2551 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System]\*\*

Elena sat in the Co-pilot seat as the pilot took them out of the Cruiser they were on. Dr. Wright sat in the third seat as they slipped into the atmosphere of the planet they were heading to.

"Where are we? I never got told where we went, and my head is still groggy from the cryo sleep" she told him.

"I'm sorry my dear, but it was better to allow you to sleep than to have you sitting around in slip space thinking over your actions. We have entered the Lambda Aurigae System. There is a base here we are heading towards. Welcome to Roost my dear. It is a tropical paradise" he told her as she looked out the cockpit windows. They moved around a mountainside and she could see beaches running along the bottom with clear blue oceans. Small birds flew by in a V formation, and they saw near one mountain an opening.

"We are diving in" the pilot told them and shot straight towards the opening. Dr. Wright closed his eyes but Elena already knew they would make it. She had made maneuvers similar in training, though she did them far faster. The pelican shot through the opening and went down a long tunnel that halfway was covered in metal plates. A bulkhead door closed behind them and they soon landed.

"Soâ€| which base are we at Dr. Wright, I don't remember anyone telling me there was one on this planet" she asked him.

"There isn't. You aren't here. We are at Roost to see to the civilians here. Nothing is happening out of the ordinary" he told her grinning. She got the hint.

This base wasn't known about. She had just fallen off the grid.

(Author's Note: CIA= Culinary Institute of America, not just Central Intelligence Agency. No, Amber isn't joining to be a spy chef, she's just joining to be a certified chef period.)

## 9. Elena II

(Author's Note: I apologize for what I need to do, there is slight copying from Eric Nylund's Fall of Reach book for the enhancements, please be advised not attempting to plagiarize, just copying what she gets. Please read on.)

Elena followed Dr. Wright off of the pelican. She had no idea where she was, only that she was on Roost. She had heard a tiny bit about the place. Weren't insurgents here? No, they couldn't be, or else they'd be under attack. She couldn't figure out the reason they were there.

"Dr. Wright" she said and stopped in her tracks. He turned around as the marine guard carried her duffels.

"Yes Elena?" he asked.

"You said you wouldn't lie to me or betray me. I need you to tell me the truth if this whole thing is so important. What are we doing here" she asked sternly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"What Dr. Halsey did to the Spartans on Reach my dear. Here, it would be better if I showed you what will happen" he told her and walked down the hallway and told the guards to take her things to her quarters.

"My quarters? How long are we staying here?" she asked.

"Until you recover from the augmentations we will be conducting on you my dear. Don't worry, as I said, you will not become a Spartan. You will be somethingâ€| new, but still you. Once the augmentations are done, you will recover under close observation. This base has a fully equipped medical facility built just for this occasion my dear. It is designed around this project. Here, let me show you something" he said and pulled out a data pad. He pressed a few buttons and a DNA scan lit up.

"These are the other children's DNA we've been observing from doctor taken blood tests. They connect these genes to the enhancements we wish to perform. Do you realize that some of them possess genes that are perfect for becoming a Spartan?" he asked her. She seemed worried.

"I apologize; I didn't mean to frighten you. However, look at this"

he said and tapped to swap to another gene layer, only one person "this is yours. Everyone else has some genes to allow the enhancements to work perfectly, this would allow for no deaths, no complications. Yours is perfect. You can accept all of them" he said and blew up her gene file.

"Soâ€¦ what's going to happen to me? I don'tâ€¦ I've lived for the past sixteen years hearing everyone tell me how weird I am or crazy because of my love of aircraft. I don't want to further provide evidence to what they say" Elena softly told him.

"I told you my dear! None of it will show outside of you! None! I mean it! We were very careful to do this. To have even one of the enhancements show could alter your psyche, change your personality and how you feel about yourself, and potentially get you killed with what we are attempting to do. We do not want that to happen. Here, let me show you exactly, to the letter, what will be done to you. You can accept this yes? If I show you what will be inserted into you to help you?" he told her. She looked behind her and saw through a glass window a huge underground medical station. A surgery room with machines she had never seen and what seemed to be at least fifty people, most likely surgeons, moving around getting things ready. For her.

"Alright. Tell me" she said.

"Good. Here, this is the list" he said and pressed a button for a much larger display.

\*\*/Start File/\*\*

\*\*Run "Shadow Program " setup.\*\*

\*\*Acknowledge. Showing augmentations. The following augmentations of "Elena Savona Esprit Gripen" will be conducted. Effects will be explained after:\*\*

\*\*WARNING: The following procedures are classified X-A3. All shadow protocols must be followed to the letter. Survival Expectancy: 99.67% Gene Configuration Compability: 100%\*\*

\*\*1. MYOMER Strand Insertion: Inserts multiple strands of advanced materials into human musculature and organs. Allows fluidity and adaptability to high gravitational forces and allows body to mitigate without damage to human frame. Insertions must be spaced at least 1.2 Nano sectors away or nerve repetition will be involved.\*\*

\*\*2. Occipital Capillary Reversal: Submergence and boosted blood vessel flow beneath the rods and cones of subject's retina. Produces a marked visual perception increase.\*\*

\*\*3. Superconducting Fibrification of neural dendrites: alteration of bioelectrical nerve transduction to shielded electronic transduction. Three hundred percent increase in subject reflexes.\*\*

\*\*4. Biomolecule Oxygen Mutation: injection of multiple modified biomolecule imprints into bone marrow. Allows marked increase in oxygen control and distribution. Increase of metabolism may occur.\*\*

\*\*5. Nano Lytic Cortex Scanner: Cybernetic. Scans neuron transfer of neuron dendrites and expands dendrite collection response. Allows Steadier control of body frame and mitigates false signals to musculature (see twitching responses) Second improvement: Allows connection to multiple neural lace aircraft (See Project: Black Blade)\*\*

\*\*6. Cochlear Trans communications Transplant: surgical modifications to the cochlea allows subject to hear sub-sonic frequencies and super-sonic frequencies without hearing loss.\*\*

\*\*7. Ocular Biomimetic Iris Terminal: Insertion of Nano lenses into the eye as well as Nano connections to the modified Cortex Scanner and Neural Interface BX-01B will allow subject to see in multiple wave lengths and provide a built in HUD under the Iris. Can see in Near Infrared, Shortwave Infrared, X-ray, and Synesthesia reaction to vibration (sounds.) Other visual spectrums may be viable. Second Improvement: Allows full function control of craft if neural connection allowed. Allows flash suppression of bright lights as well as magnification capabilities due to multiple lenses. WARNING: Must be inserted into core of ocular with a maximum deviation of .01 Nano sectors. Failure will blind subject permanently and trigger pain nerve repetition.\*\*

\*\*8. Nano gel layering: Adds an extra layer of biologically modified collagen under the skin layers, providing a vibration and G force resistance layer to minimize reverberation and structural break down of body. No side effects to body weight or subject looks will be noted.\*\*

\*\*9. Defibrillation providing pace instructor: Installed into chest just under left clavicle and leads floated down artery to heart. Allows re-awakening from syncope due to high G forces and global cerebral hypo perfusion.\*\*

\*\*10. Arterial Brain Constriction Response: nanotubes inserted into the cerebral blood flow to assist in blood transition and provide a reverse Ischemic response catalyst\*\*

\*\*11. Haptic Neural Interface: biochips inserted under the finger tips, palms, and feet allow interaction with special holographic interfaces, applying a new level of security to multiple new weapon systems and vehicles.\*\*

\*\*/End Log/\*\*

Elena was silent. Dr. Wright looked at her carefully, studying her face.

"Are you afraid?" He asked.

"Of course I'm afraid. I'm terrified. This is what you are going to do to me?" she asked.

"Yes. Trust me; we have practiced surgeons for this. I promise you will be fine my dear" he told her. She looked at him and he could tell she was thinking hard about what was happening.

"Pinkie swear" she told him. He looked confused.

"The promise means nothing to me unless you pinkie swear" she told him.

\*\*[1200 hours, August 20\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2551 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Two Steps from Hell â€" Strength of a Thousand Men]\*\*

The surgeons were quick and efficient as Dr. Wright observed from the room above. Elena was anesthetized on the bed with multiple machines turned on and moving around them. They opened her efficiently, placing what they needed for the enhancements.

"Her BP is good, continue" one said as another mumbled something about opening a part of her body.

\_Father?\_

"I need that Atrocyl and Anocicol over here" another said, as a nurse brought over two required medications.

\_Where are you?\_

"She's looking good, keep the implants off, we don't want her waking up with things completely different. She needs to ease into it or it could cause neural collapse" the head surgeon told them.

\_I'm scared\_

"Oxygen levels are 100%, she's still breathing well" a nurse told them.

\_What's happening to me?\_

"Run the strands through" someone called.

\_I can't feel anything\_

"Running diagnostics. She's reacting very well to the stimulus" a woman said.

\_I will not die here!\_

"Alright, it's all completed? Let's close her up" the head surgeon told everyone.

\_I want to go home!\_

\*\*[1300 hours, September 20\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2551 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

Elena slowly awoke. Her eyes hurt like someone shoved hot pokers into them. Her body ached and sharp pains could be felt through. Under all of that was the feeling she was submersed in cooking oil just under her skin. She could see in red only, and saw tints of black and white showing lights and the edges of objects. She closed her eyes again, and still realized her eyes were hurting. She opened them again and looked around.

She was on a medical bed in a room with multiple wires attached to

her, and a long tube going down her throat. A catheter was in not one, but both arms as she noticed she had saline solution and some drip fed medication flowing from one, and what looked like red stuff in another. Blood. She seemed to be covered in bandages. It hurt just to turn her head as much as she did. She saw a form of someone, she didn't know who, move towards her and say something, but it was loud and incomprehensible. They moved to her side as another form showed up and looked at the other. They said something, and then she felt a cool prick into her arm. A needle? She felt extremely drowsy after that, and the pain started to fade with her consciousness.

\*\*[0700 hours, October 20\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2551 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

Elena woke up again. Where was she? What day is it? What's going on? Her eyes still hurt, but far less than what she had felt the last time. How long was she asleep? She no longer felt sharp pains in her body, and the oily feeling was gone. She still felt sore however. She could see normally again, but everything was extremely bright. She turned her head and snapped it left quickly, too quickly. She didn't feel any pain, but what she saw didn't make sense. There was a nurse that wasn't there before, until her head moved so quick it was like a picture change. It felt odd to react so fast.

The nurse walked up to her and spoke, and his mouth seemed to move too slowly for what words she heard. Her hearing was returning, but everything was loud.

"She's coming around again sir, what should we do?" he asked, almost sounding like he was screaming near her.

"Put her back under. Her body has still not fully healed or responded to the enhancements. Give her some more time" she heard another loud voice say. She felt another pin prick and she slowly faded back into unconsciousness.

\*\*[0900 hours, November 19\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2551 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

Elena woke again. How many times was this? She needed answers.

"Sir, she's coming around" she heard, and her hearing didn't make it sound like a bomb was going off near her.

"Damn it god, please let her pull through this. We did everything we could, now pull through!" she heard another voice nearby or was it across the room? She looked confused as she watched them.

"Sir, she doesn't seem to be grimacing in pain anymore. Her stats are stable" the nurse nearby said.

"Elena, can you hear me? You don't have to shake your head, just blink once for a yes" Dr. Wright said to her. He was there in the room. She blinked to respond, though she felt she could turn her neck well enough, although it was sore.

"Thank the lord you scared me beyond anything you can imagine. We were so sure your body would adapt to the augmentations, we didn't expect your immune system to react so aggressively. The Spartans I don't think had this problem but I think I'll need to check with



Catherine; it was extraordinary and horrifying at the same time. We were finally able to slow down your immune system before it attempted to reject the augmentations. It's now favoring the augmentations Elena. You'll be just fine now" He told her. She tried to speak but her mouth felt like sand paper. There were so many thoughts flying through her head, she had difficulty picking out which one to tell him. She thought carefully, focusing as she tried to think of just one question to ask as the nurse took a wet sponge spoon and pushed it into her mouth, dissolving the sand paper feeling she had.

"How longâ€¦" she hoarsely asked.

"You've been bed ridden for three months now, as your body tried to fight off the augmentations. We fought back with numbers of medications, Proactol, Messanol, Iridopifin, just to name a few. Finally, it's allowing you to move forward." Elena moved her arm carefully, as she thought that if she pushed too fast, she'd leap out of the bed for some reason. Her body reacted far too fast, and the world felt far too slow. She would have to get used to this. She slowly lifted herself to a sitting position, a somewhat sore body reacting to the movement, but no immediate pain.

The nurse held his hands out to help support her as she sat upright, and looked around. Another doctor came into the room with a light in his hands along with multiple other nurses.

"Alright Elena, I need to look into your eyes" he said and shined the small flashlight into her eyes. She immediately saw a response as her eyes seemed to go to inverse monochrome temporarily.

"Her eyes responded to it" the doctor said as he lowered the flashlight and her vision returned. He raised the flashlight again and her eyes adjusted quickly, darkening the surroundings to suppress the light.

"Alright, can you hear me?" he asked. She nodded, but her neck felt sore.

"Pain?" he asked. She shook her head slowly.

"Stiff" she replied hoarsely.

"She's been moved consistently yes? To keep her from getting bed sores?" he asked. The nurses all nodded.

"Alright, I'm going to go to the end of the room now" he said and got up, then moved to the other side of the room.

"Can you hear me?" he asked and she indeed heard every word as she focused on him. She nodded.

"Good. Hearing and visual are fine now; we haven't turned on anything that could throw you through a loop yet Elena. We just need you to get through rehab. After that is done, we will slowly turn on the enhancements alright? Some of them are already working as there is no off button for them, they are biological. Most of the ones we are talking about are in your eyes. Right now, we should probably get started on the rehab" the doctor said and helped her slowly get out of the bed. She felt unbelievably weak. Three months? She must have lost some muscles in that time.

"Have Iâ€|" she tried to say.

"You look fine Elena. If you are asking about your body, nothing has changed. The MYOMER high tensile strands kept you from losing muscle mass as well as bone density control. The only thing you need to worry about is relearning to walk, to move efficiently like you used to and how to control the enhancements in the future. Are you ready to try?" Dr. Wright asked. She slowly looked around at everyone. She could easily flip around if she wanted to, faster than any of them, but she needed to keep control of her movements, just like she was before.

"Doctor, look at this. This is amazing. Her reaction time just from moving is 12 milliseconds. That's faster than a Spartan's 20! Obviously the cortex scanner was required to keep her from just smashing into a wall trying to get out through a door" a nurse said.

"Good thing we dialed it down. Ok Elena. Let's take it from the top."

\*\*[1100 hours, February 8\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

Elena was walking down the hallway softly. She was doing her best to find the little clues that Dr. Wright had placed to continue on a training hunt. The course was designed to make her use all of her eye enhancements to see how well she could transfer between the views. So far, she was only missing one clue. She couldn't find it in any of the rooms so far, and almost all of the others showed up as either heat emitting objects, light emitting objects or producing some form of vibration that she could detect. Where was the last one?

She suddenly felt stupid as she remembered the last view she had yet to even care about, as she was too afraid to see something she didn't want to see like someone showering, was the x-ray viewing. She looked around the room after concentrating, activating the view with a thought as her eyes reacted and changed lenses on the fly. Everything was bathed in a low light laser etching around their forms, and she could see through the walls to see guards walking up and down the hallways. As she watched one guard move to her left, she noticed something on the wall. She turned off the x-ray and saw nothing.

"Shit" she mumbled and walked up to the wall, and tapped different panels until one sounded wrong to her. She pushed on the side of the panel and it moved, and inside was the object.

"Very good. All of them seem to be working well with no latency issues of any sort or rod damage" Dr. Wright told her as he entered the room.

"Alright, so, I'm back up and running, what do I do now?" she asked.

"You test your flying skills in the sim pod" Dr. Wright told her.

\*\*[1900 hours, February 22\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda

Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

Elena was giddy. She had finally gotten her reflexes back under control. At first she was over steering or pushing too much thrust, responding extremely poorly in the sim pod. Her scores were horrible. No wonder he didn't want her to practice in a real jet. She'd kill herself. After eight straight hours of controlling her own body each day, however, and actually figuring out how to dial down her own cortex scanner and dialing it up, she was much faster, and her scores nearly tripled over her previous top ratings. Once she officially dialed her cortex scanner for maximum effect and learned to control it, her score doubled again.

The cortex scanner was a marvel for her through the entire training, as it literally acted like a lag producer. When she wanted to react normally, she simply focused and somehow some subconscious production of neurons fired and told it to slow her down, and she could walk and talk and see normally as she used to. She enjoyed finally being able to sit and have normal conversations with people instead of constantly watching their lips and connecting their words to them. When she wished to react faster in a flight simulation, she "willed" the cortex scanner to increase neuron firing control, and she would see in slow motion, twitch and fire a missile and already be swapped to guns, then dropping a bomb, almost within the same second, meanwhile already calculating her next angle to evade enemy fire.

"You've done amicably as I knew you would" Dr. Wright told her as she got out of the sim pod.

"Alright, so far I've gotten back into being able to live normally, and I can fly better than I ever did before. What next?" she asked.

"Well, you can fly now; the problem we still need to bring to bear is in the event you crash land, which I know you are thinking is doubtful, but still. Think. You react well in the sim pod, but can you react well at the firing range and survival courses?" he asked her. She cocked an eyebrow and wondered what he had in mind.

\*\*[1300 hours, March 1\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

The Captain never saw it coming. She was dropped into the wilderness on Roost and told to make it back to the base, and given a map to do so. It would take her one week of trying to live off the land and finish this survival course they had planned. She knew she was being constantly monitored, but she really hated how it was done. She was dropped from a pelican onto the ground from twenty feet off the ground, then was blasted backwards by thruster shock as the Captain and his guards left the area, as she found out they were ODSs. She soon realized that her HUD inside her eyes could track the map she was given and overlay her GPS connection from her neural lace onto it, and show her exactly where she needed to go with the modified attachments provided to the lace. As she entered the base silently, she came up right behind the Captain. He turned around and she brought her fist up fast and hard with a haymaker. He crumpled to the ground holding his nose.

"Son of a bitch!" he mumbled from the blood gushing out.

"Eat shit and die asshole! I don't care if you are a Captain, you don't drop people who just went through medical rehab from a pelican from twenty feet up!" she snapped at him and looked at the other two guards near him. They backed off. She walked by and stormed to her quarters to take a shower. She was utterly covered in filth.

\*\*[0800 hours, March 5\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

Elena felt the hand on her shoulder and knew one of two things. She needed to wake up and find out who it was and what they wanted, and two, to potentially consider them hostile and kick them in the nuts as she could already tell by using her x-ray visual that they were positioned perfectly near her legs.

"Elena, Elena! I need you to wake up" she heard Dr. Wright's voice. She decided against kicking the old man.

"Don't I get time to recuperate from the survival course?" She asked as she softly pushed his hand off her shoulder and tried to go back to sleep. She found out long ago that she could turn off all eye and ear enhancements with a thought to the neural lace. It helped when she was in a noisy room and people were watching TV but she still had to be there, as she could produce a noise cancelling effect in her ear and a permanent flash drop in her eyes while she lay down.

"I need to show you something impressive. Come with me" he said. She sighed and got up, then moved to go get changed.

"I'll be waiting outside" he told her and he walked out. She grabbed some clean clothes and went to take a shower. Once she came out and dried her hair, she put her clothes on and came outside, looking at him.

"Alright, what did you want to show me?" she asked.

"Come with me" he told her and walked down a few hallways. He moved towards an elevator and got inside. She followed him in and the lift went down for some time.

"Elena, ever since you've been here, have you thought about once you are ready to go out? What you would be flying?" he asked her.

"I don't understand. I thought I'd be flying a Long Sword" she told him, looking at him quizzically.

"And why would you say that?" he asked her.

"Because that's what I trained in and it's what I can fight in, and it's the most advanced fighter we have at our disposal besides that Sabre program you were able to show me files of" she told him. She suddenly looked at him oddly.

"My Long Sword was never shipped here was it?" she suddenly said. He smiled.

"No, and actually it was never your Long Sword to begin with. You weren't issued a fighter yet. We were going to wait until you had recovered to issue you one" he said.

"So, do I get my Long Sword now or what?" she asked.

"Oh, you get to fly a Long Sword, temporarily, to test the G resistance you should have to finish the rehab, however, once that is done, you will no longer be flying a Long Sword" he told her.

"Ok, so I fly a Pelican? Or a Sky Hawk? Or maybe a Sabre?" she asked.

"Not exactly. Let me show you" he said and the doors opened. They walked out into a very large hangar. In the middle, was a fighter the likes of which she had never seen. It looked to be similar to an old F-22 but longer, and it had two small delta wing canards near the cockpit, with what looked to be two forward swept inner folding swing wings, then its smaller tails in the back. Two massive engines were seen in the back of it, as well as two diagonal tail fins on top. The cockpit did not have a glass covering like she expected, but what looked like a honeycomb texturing of armor, but shiny.

"It's still not finished yet, we are still incorporating multiple different types of technology. This is project YF-1200 Black Blade. The design is meant for air and space superiority, and highly adaptable. The armor is made out of a self-repairing semi organic Nano weave and nanotubes. It will repair itself in time, but not nearly as fast as its shields." Elena flipped around and looked at him like he had two heads.

"Yes my dear, it has shields, or it will soon. We've gained a sabre shield system we will be installing. The armor itself, as it is a Nano weave, also provides a photo cell paneling that helps it camouflage itself for stealth missions. We've also been able to reproduce the active camouflage of Stealth Elites and produced it on a larger scale" he told her.

"I thought we couldn't replicate that kind of technology yet" she asked him.

"We can't replicate that technology for infantry my dear, for a fighter with a larger power supply and easier to control its angles, it is possible. We already have prowlers testing it as we speak. Now, the advances in military science have allowed us to carry two weapons bays internally as well as three standard weapons. One weapon which is not installed yet is two 20mm auto cannons for armor piercing effect. This is a mainstay weapon for it, and will never go away. Afterwards, there are two rail cannons that are installed. These are modified from the Gauss systems you would see on a warthog, and are provided for anti-vehicle or air to air quick knock outs. It's somewhat slower to fire than the 20mm cannons, and is more difficult to aim, however I doubt it will cause much of a problem for you to hit your target" He told her smirking.

"The third main weapon is an enlarged APEX Tactical Laser Array that runs down its nose. It fires from a non-colored "White" beam in atmosphere and no visible color in the spacious void. It is almost a guaranteed kill if it hits something and you can cut it in half, otherwise it's useful for overloading shields quickly and then finishing them off with more conventional projectiles or explosives. The laser is a surgical device, not what you'd expect to see in a movie or a videogame Elena. It takes one minute to charge, the best

we could do with everything else activated and shields emitting. It however fires for three seconds continuously. Luckily, the pod can change its attack trajectory within a forty five degree radius in front of it. You will not see some glorious explosion, but a coring effect through whatever you attack, burning a hole, so as I said, cutting motions, hence it fires for three seconds."

Elena walked towards the thing and brushed her fingers against the side.

"The internal bays would carry an assortment of missiles and bombs according to the mission, however, one of those bays is standard equipped for missile housing, and the other is for the assortment. This is a superiority fighter, so we expect you to take the fight to the enemy in the sky or in space and win. There are other hard points outside on the wings, but that will lower stealth aspects of it. The engines are a new marvel we've been able to develop, capable of rotating depending on what is needed. They are modified Pulse Detonation Wave Engines with a design constantly being upgraded since the mid twenty first century. And there is something else we are trying to place inside of it" Dr. Wright walked over to a table and pulled a sheet from it.

"A Shaw-Fujikawa drive."

Elena looked at both the fighter and at Dr. Wright.

"When will it be finished?" she asked.

"We're still building her, gaining the parts here and there. Patience my dear, we have all the parts available, we simply need to get them here, and install them properly. Once they are installed, you will test the fighter. Afterwards, you will meet your flight team who are still being trained on Earth" he told her. She would have a flight squadron? Other pilots who were like herâ€|

"Will they be augmented like I am?" she asked.

"No, as I said, funding was limited on that regard, but once they see how you perform, they'll want to have the others augmented as well. We simply have to wait and be patient. The parts are coming as well speak; we simply have to hold on. Until then, there is a Long Sword in hangar three, go test yourself for atmospheric flight and re-entry. You need to get a clean bill of health from Doctor Phillips."

\*\*[1400 hours, August 30\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

Elena got up from working on the panel she was screwing in as she finally helped install the rail guns into the wings of the experimental fighter. There were five of them, and she did what she could to help pass the time by helping the maintenance crews install parts, perform tests, and became incredibly knowledgeable about the crafts. She didn't mind the fact she had yet to do any real fighting. She enjoyed the fact she was still being productive with getting the fighters she would use up and running.

She felt hungry and realized she was the only one in the hangar, so she decided to go up the lift and get some lunch.

She unfortunately heard running footsteps coming from the left as she exited the lift. She turned and saw a Sergeant run up to her and multiple others run by her.

"Ma'am! You're gonna wanna see Dr. Wright right away" he told her panting.

"Slow down Sergeant, what's wrong?" she asked him.

"It's Reach ma'am. Reach just fell."

Elena was shocked. Reach was gone? There couldn't possibly be a way. She ran to the CIC and opened the door. Inside Dr. Wright was listening to battle chatter alongside a captain.

"We can't hold the line! We're being overrun! They've got brute packs everywhere!" she heard come from the recording.

"Pillar of Autumn has just finished launching! It's away! Good luck down there Spartan!" she heard as she walked up to the two men. Dr. Wright sighed as the Captain covered his eyes with his hand.

"We lost too many men and women on that Planet" and too many Spartans" he whispered.

"Dr. Wright? It can't be true" is it?" Elena asked. Both men flipped around, not hearing her enter.

"Sadly my dear, Reach has been glassed. The Covenant is practically on Earth's doorstep now" Dr. Wright told her, and closed his eyes in deep concentration with his brow furrowed.

"Shouldn't" shouldn't we go back and help in preparing a defense?" she asked, looking between the two men.

"Frankly, it would be pointless" the Captain told her.

"Are you kidding me? They could use everyone they can get their hands on!" she yelled at him.

"And what would that do Lieutenant? Extra bodies to throw under their war machine? Think Lieutenant. We have what, four frigates in the shipyards here barely completed, we have one, I repeat, ONE marathon cruiser that we can use here to protect the base. We have one wing of Long Sword fighters and your prototypes aren't even finished! What would you expect to do against a fleet?" he asked her sternly "I'm serious! Tell me."

She thought for a moment. Every part of her wanted desperately to get back to Earth and fight, to protect her loved ones, but the time frame just to get prepped and have all ships in space would take at least two weeks at the earliest, then munitions loading, supplies accounts, troop transfers, and the fighter she was supposed to fly wasn't even finished. She could fly a Long Sword into the battle, if and when it happened, but she wouldn't be neural connected to it and it would be feel sluggish compared to the sim training she's had on the new Black Blade.

Even if they had everything up and running, it would take a month in

slip space to get to Earth, maybe more as slip space didn't fully adhere to normal laws of physics. She was stuck.

"Look, Lieutenant, I know you and I have had our differences, and trust me, if we were given the go ahead and had a chance, I would have already had you boarding the damned cruiser right now instead of arguing with me. But we can't. I can't. I want to get there right now and see my wife and kids. I'm worried too, but right now we need to complete this project. If we are to stand any chance at fighting, we need to gather what strength we have, and then hopefully meet up with remainder forces once everything is under control. Earth hasn't fallen yet, it isn't even under attack. We have some time" the Captain told her.

She frowned, and then realized he was right. Rushing off wouldn't help anyone, it would just get her killed and she still wouldn't be any closer to seeing her family or Andy.

\*\*[1700 hours, October 20\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System, Roost]\*\*

Elena was pissed. She had just gone to the gym to work out and keep her body in shape, did some dance warm ups as she was tired of working on installing the parts into the fighters. She had just found out the MAC platforms over Earth were under attack by a long range communication sent eight hours ago, and just received by the base. She felt helpless. Earth was under attack, and here she was with unfinished fighters and 150,000 personnel hiding under multiple mountains. She felt like she was in slip space, with nothing to do but wait. They received information here and there, bits and pieces from the battle net telling them what was going on, but for the most part they were sitting there.

Elena went back down to the hangar and jumped into the sim pod. "Running O/S update, unavailable, please try later" she saw on the screen. She growled loudly and got out and kicked the side of it. She then turned around and slide down to sit leaning against the pod. A hand came forward holding a cola.

"Here, sugar tends to help with being here" she heard a familiar voice. She looked up, and standing in front of her was Ezekiel.

"Oh my godâ€¦| you're here?" she asked gawking.

"Aye, I came in on the last transport of personnel. I heard I was needed to help a special friend, and I immediately knew who it was. How are you doing girly?" he smiled as she got up and hugged him.

"Better now that you're here. What are you doing here though? Working on the pelicans?" she asked.

"Actually, you see, I'm working on the Black Blade maintenance just like you are. My team was briefed and sent the blueprints a month ago, and we've been figuring things out as we came here. You've got yourself a mighty fine craft there lass, just you wait until we get it out there kicking some arse" he said grinning.

Elena smiled. She didn't feel so alone in the base anymore now. She had talked to a few people, and had some conversations with some



higher personnel, gone through briefings, but she didn't really make friends here. Most of the people were in the same position she was in, they wanted to go home and see their family, if it was only one last time.

"Iâ€¦ I'm sorry about your da. He was a good man he was, and a lot of people looked up to him. He would be so proud of you now. I mean, look at you, a 1st Lieutenant in the Air Force, augments making you a super pilot or some such, a new fighter" he motioned up to the Black Blade behind them "though it's still got the nickname Shit Heap until it's finished." Elena laughed, the first laugh she's had in a long time.

"Just like the Esprit huh?" she asked. He nodded with eyes wide. "You better believe that. Those engines are a bugger to calibrate. Bloody designers, over complicating things for us techs." They both laughed and clinked their colas together and drank.

"It's good to see you again Zeks. I needed a friend" she punched him in the shoulder playfully.

"And I needed to know you were alright Elena. Things have been getting hectic for the past few months with you disappearing to here. I couldn't live with myself if I let my friend's daughter get harmed before she's barely started her life. He'd haunt me for years eternal I'll tell ya" he said and looked around, thinking he might see a ghost of her father appear. She laughed hard and held her side, not able to breathe as he looked nervous then chuckled.

"So, you have more news than the damned recordings we're getting. I need info. Spill your guts, tell me everything" she asked.

\*\*[1000 hours, November 13\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Aurigae System]\*\*

Elena woke up to some shaking of her shoulders.

"Elena, wake up! We finished it!" she heard Ezekiel tell her.

"What? Finishedâ€¦ oh!" she jumped up faster than he thought she should be able to.

"Aye, it's all done. We just need a maiden voyage and then we're getting into the \_Honor Bound\_ and prepped to go to Earth. Defense forces are taking a severe beating, but they're still fighting, so if we move, we'll get there in time to help. And you'll never believe what I found out girlie" he said, grinning.

"What? Spit it out! Spit it out!" she told him.

"The elites are on our side. They found out about what the halo arrays really are and are assisting the Master Chief in stopping the Covenant Loyalist Forces. Come on, get a shower and get dressed, I'll meet you down in the hangar" he told her and bunny hopped slightly and left the room.

She ran to her dresser and picked out some clothes, then stripped and jumped in the shower. She was lucky to have her own shower, and the only time she had ever had to do co-ed bathrooms was during the Academy and at Nellis AFB. She looked at herself quickly as she

surveyed her skin. The medical gels they used along with modified external bio foam allowed her to not have any scars from the augments she gained. She felt lucky, it could have been much worse. She could be covered from head to toe in them, or have deformities from her immune system rejecting the enhancements.

She quickly got out just as the shower turned itself off, and dried her hair. She put her clothes on and ran out of her room, shooting by multiple personnel and leaping into the lift heading to the hangar. When she reached the bottom, she got out of it and ran to Ezekiel who had a new flight suit held in his hands.

"Ah, there she is. Elena, we have a surprise for you" Dr. Wright told her with a large smile on his face.

"Ezekiel told me. The fighters are complete?" She said.

"Actually, this is a new surprise. A new flight suit take a look" he said and Ezekiel held it out. It looked to be made out of a black Kevlar mesh with very small tubes running around parts of it, emulating muscles. There were armor plates and harness webbing attached above the muscle weaves.

"This is the new G suit we've been working on. It's a mixture of nanotubes with a modified liquid crystal similar to the stuff used in the MJOLNIR armor the Spartans wear, but this, this will not increase your strength. The crystal that was used in the MJOLNIR is difficult to dial down in control, and could hurt you since you are not a Spartan, though with your augments, you most likely would not suffer the same fate as previous testers. This crystal acts similar to old fashioned water suits, and significantly drops G forces applied to your body. It also assists in vibration control and protection against harmful breaches. It is fully vacuum pressurized just like the MJOLNIR though provides far more information and camera adaptation. Considering you are using a fighter to remove hostiles from the land of the living, I doubt you'd need to use the same equipment."

"The suit does not have shields, but it does have reactive photo cell paneling installed as well as zero g thruster systems installed into the frame. This, should you ever find yourself in need of moving through vacuum, would be helpful. The helmet provides a connection link to your neural interface, and with that, connects to the Black Blade. It provides a virtual HUD imprint overlay into your eyes from special holographic emitters inside the helmet, as well as a standard HUD along the lenses of the helmet itself. Add in how your eyes now work, and you will have three layers of information you can react to or remove as you see fit. The under layering is a ballistic Kevlar weave too with a gel cushioning to further protect you." Elena listened to everything he said to the letter, and committed it to memory as she may very well need to use some of the features.

"Alright, let's get you suited up" Dr. Wright said and Ezekiel handed her the suit. She walked behind a curtain and stripped, then pulled the suit on. It was actually similar to any other suit she had to slip on, and she was afraid it would be in pieces that she would need technicians to help her with.

Dr. Wright and Ezekiel could see her form through the curtain as she

took her clothes off, and both of their eyes widened and they tilted a bit, then realized what they were doing and chastised themselves.

As she snapped the last harness strap together, she realized the suit was a bit big. She walked out feeling a bit awkward.

"Ah, now to allow it to adjust to your body's dimensions" Dr. Wright said and motioned to her eyes. She looked at her HUD and noticed the suit functions were listed from her neural interface. She activated them and soon found the suit shrinking to conform to her body. It didn't show anything revealing, but it was much smaller than it previously was. It wasn't a cat suit, but it wasn't Marine body armor either.

"That's to allow you to get in and out of it when you need to; otherwise I highly doubt you'd be able to squeeze in. Now, the helmet."

Ezekiel handed her the helmet. It looked to be a completely redone MJOLNIR Mk VI helmet with a modified breather mask. It had no mirrored visor, though it had what looked like a speaker system installed where the eyes would look out. It also did not have the fins over the eyes. She needed all the visual space she could to fly, and didn't need something blocking her view, regardless of how she gained it.

"Those are the virtual overlay goggles installed into it" Dr. Wright told her, and she suddenly saw the middle of each suddenly iris out and show a blue lens under them "this will take the surrounding information outside into the cameras and feed it into the helmet. This will provide better protection and more gel layering to resist g forces to your face than having a visor. It will also provide magnification enhancing software to coordinate with the fighter, allowing you to see from different weapon cameras for better angles."

She tied her hair into a bun and slipped the helmet over her head, hearing the hiss as the seals locked down and couplings engaged. Her HUD immediately sprang to life, and gave her her vitals as well as a map of the surroundings, her GPS signal, communications as well as a camera view of what was behind her. The HUD quickly overlaid armor systems on top of her eyes, as well as her eyes showing other information, working in concert to give her a truly crisp view. She could see the threads interwoven through the buttons on Dr. Wright's lab coat with crystal clarity.

"How does it feel?" He asked.

"Like I'm not wearing anything. Is it supposed to feel like this?" she asked. He smiled and chuckled.

"Yes it is supposed to feel like that. You'll need to focus on flying, not on your armor. One other thing. The suit will clamp down on parts of your body to keep blood flow in specific areas so that it doesn't pool to your extremities in the middle of a high g maneuver, same as the old g suits you would wear. This however does so in an adaptable scan of how your heart is functioning by reading your pacer. The pacer will not activate unless it registers your BP under a specific low number. Are you ready?" he asked.

She nodded and walked to the prototype fighter. She looked up and saw the cockpit. It was an advanced design, as there was no longer a bubble of glass or plastic to see out of, but a sealed armor layering of multiple hexagons interwoven together with small cameras installed into them, similar to the lenses she now had in her eyes. It covered not just the top, but the bottom as well.

"The new SEEKER cockpit will provide an almost 720 view for you while your inside and connected. Other small cameras are installed around the fighter so you can monitor any damage sustained, enemy flanking or missile launches or even fellow wingmen. You won't just detect something nearby you with radar and other sensors, you'll be able to see them as if you were staring right at them, and yet still be facing forward and continuing flying. Everything has been streamlined to provide quick response." Elena got to the top of the small ladder and pressed for a button. There wasn't one.

"You have to send a release signal from your neural interface with the suit on" Dr. Wright explained. She nodded and tried to gain a communication signal from the fighter. As if on cue, it registered its pilot and the cockpit roof rose upwards on hydraulics, with a loud hiss as the seals uncoupled. She slid inside and sat down, then noticed just what Dr. Wright was saying. The entire cockpit had holo panels or touch sensitive keyboards. She had two flight sticks, not just one like she expected, and had the throttle actually attached to one of them. She strapped herself in and locked her harness into a connection in the seat. She laid her head against the seat rest and felt something jack into the helmet, then felt a cold rush of water fill her mind, followed by an odd feeling of seeing from two different views.

"Elena, do you read me?" Ezekiel asked as he couldn't see her anymore.

"Yeah, I read you" she said calmly as she pressed one button that wasn't touch sensitive. The internal generator started up and the engines woke to her touch. The fighter felt welcoming, like it knew who it belonged to.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score "Adventure Like No Other]\*\*

"We're going to do just a free for all here, you're going to leave the hangar through the main doors via taxi, we don't want you to try the JTOL hybrid systems just yet, and then once you're outside, you are clear for flight already, so no need for requesting launch from CIC. Let's see what this bad girl can do" he told her. She acknowledged and disengaged lock clamps on the fighter, then let an automated tug pull the fighter forward through the opening doors. It turned left down a pre-set line and onto a small launch way.

"You're clear for burn Elena, launch when ready" Ezekiel told her. She winked her green light to the com channel and fired her afterburners. She shot forward with incredible speed as she didn't realize the normal position for a Long Sword throttle was much smaller on the Black Blade. This thing could go much faster than she expected. She felt almost no gravitational force against her as she did so however, and was soon off into the sky and turning.

She laughed as she broke towards the atmosphere as fast as she

figured she could go.

"Uh, Elena" Ezekiel started to speak.

"You said I could test this in a free for all. I'm testing it. Going for a high rise" she responded and a small smile crept onto her mouth. She fired off her PDWEs and shot high into the sky, shooting through the atmosphere far quicker than any Long Sword or even the Sabre could achieve, even with rocket assistance. She finished breaking through the thermosphere and sat there, turning off all outside thrust and allowing the adaptive thrust controls as well as her own subconscious to place her movement at zero. She sat there staring at the planet she had spent a year on. It was beautiful, with tropical zones as well as some deserts, some mountain ranges she didn't even get a chance to see, and one continent that looked strangely similar to South America.

"Have you finished having fun yet up there?" Ezekiel chuckled.

"No, not yet" she said and fired off her engines. She shot straight down through the atmosphere, the advanced materials and shields not even caring about the increase in heat as she flew straight towards the ground. She broke her straight down move halfway and pulled up, the fighter responded beyond anything she'd experienced, as it didn't groan or fight her to change its direction. A sonic boom cracked off behind her as she shot over an ocean, realizing she was at Mach 7 and climbing.

"Wow, she's not held together with chewing gum and rubber bands is she?" she asked laughing.

"What did you expect? The shields are helping with the heat transfer and wind shear and the advanced composites the armor is made out of is a build off of your friend's, what was his name, Marcus, his compressor materials. She's the most advanced fighter we have right now, and she will be for quite some time with what she's got" Ezekiel told her over the coms.

"She's got something to prove against the big boys I'll tell you that" Elena said.

Elena worked her PDWEs like a pro, already knowing how they respond from previous sim pod training. She flew over the ocean, creating a blast tunnel through the water as she flew. She rose up and spiraled, testing all parts.

"How does she feel?" Dr. Wright asked.

"Like a dream" Elena softly responded. The fighter responded far faster and more reliably than any other craft she had flown. Her pelican was a slug compared to it, though she still loved it. She loved the Esprit for multiple reasons, but one of which was obvious. At the end of the day, it didn't belong to the UNSC. It was hers, and it acted similar to an old pet. It was elderly and slow, but you still remember the good times with it and it loves you back loyally. She still enjoyed her new fighter though.

Elena shot through the air faster than she'd ever been able to, then back up towards the atmosphere.

"Elenaâ€|" Ezekiel said.

"What? I'm gonna go test the space efficiency near the \_Honor Bound\_" she told him. He chuckled as she shot up again, and exited the atmosphere a second time. She could see the cruiser in the far distance, a slight metal spec, but she used the fighter's magnification as well as her helmet and her eyes to zoom in on it and place a tracking marker through IFF connections. She bursted towards it quite quickly, then realized she was in space, and there was no friction. She slowed down by activating a combination of attitude micro thrusters and ion dispersal catalysts that the generator created on its own. It normally decayed quickly, but could be used as an unlimited short form movement source.

She zipped around the side of the cruiser, the ship already knowing she was coming and she could see through the bridge's window everyone waving and clapping.

"Alright Elena, you've had your fun, come back down so we can check the flight logs" Ezekiel told her.

"Fine" She grumbled and shot back down through the atmosphere and towards the base.

She landed quickly by testing the JTOL systems installed, and slowly hovered her way down to the ground, and was taxied inside by an auto tug. She opened the cockpit and slipped out and onto a waiting staircase and down, then popped her helmet off.

"So? Any problems you could see?" Ezekiel asked her.

"None with the flying, any sensor alerts on your end? No dips in armor reaction or power fluctuations you saw?" she asked.

"None, which is a tech's wet dream, a prototype fighter that doesn't have any flaws from day one. That's insanely rare girlie. EVERYTHING has a flaw in some form when it's first rolled out. This big girlâ€| she's got something to prove alright. She's ready" Ezekiel told her and patted the fighter on the side armor of the cockpit.

"Alright, so, what do we do now?" Elena asked, and then looked at Dr. Wright.

"We head home and hope we can make a difference" he told her. Elena suddenly had a big grin on her face. She'd get to finally take the fight to the Covenant, and exact some vengeance.

\*\*[0500 hours, December 13\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System]\*\*

Elena couldn't believe it. She had come all this way, with four frigates and a cruiser, five wings of Long Sword fighters and four other Black Blades for any of the other fighter pilots she'd be joining, and the war was over. She stood there dumbfounded on the bridge, alongside Captain Markovic as they watched Earth. Africa was glassed, but Earth was still there. They could see fire spots on other continents, where either nuclear weapons were launched in scorched earth protocols or by the Covenant destroying cities. She was thankful. San Francisco was damaged, but it wasn't gone.

"Soâ€¦ whatâ€¦ do we do?" a bridge crewmember asked.

"We go down and provide some emergency assistance where we can. Lieutenant Gripen, I know you wanted to go out there and show what you're made of, but right now, there are people hurting down there that need help. You can take a pelican and head down and see if you can't provide some relief" Markovic asked her.

"Yes sir! May I head to San Francisco and provide the relief sir?" she asked.

"Go. We need to do what we can where we can" he told her.

She saluted and walked off the bridge and towards hangar nine. Her fighter was in hangar two, but she didn't need it. The war was won, but at a heavy cost.

"Elena! Elena!" she heard coming from behind her. She looked down the hallway and in the far distance, Dr. Wright was running towards her, though he was old and running out of breath quickly. She didn't want him to keel over, so she ran towards him to cut the distance.

"What's wrong? What's going on?" She asked as he stopped and caught his breath. She put her hand on his shoulder in a helping maneuver.

"The other pilotsâ€¦ the ones we were looking for that were supposed to be in your squadron" he started and panted. He said "were supposed to be" and to her, that couldn't be good.

"What's wrong? Here, sit down" she said and helped him to a small metal bench on the side of the hallway.

"Thank youâ€¦ the other pilots, the ones you were supposed to eventually meet up with. Three of them were killed in the air trying to defend Earth with Long Sword fighters, and the building the others were staying inâ€¦ Elena, they're dead" he told her, his eyes almost bloodshot. He had been crying. She sat next to him blinking, stunned.

"Howâ€¦ how many were there?" she asked.

"Twelve. Twelve lives lost that held such promise. You're the only one left Elena. Without you, the project would have to start from scratch" he said, and pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, then the bridge of his nose.

"They can't all beâ€¦" she tried to say.

"I have confirmation of their bodies and the fighters going down. All of them. I can't believe it. All of that training they went through, all of that work they did, thrown away. Their livesâ€¦ they never got to show what they could doâ€¦" he softly said, then held his head in his hands.

"Go; go down to wherever it is your going, do what you can. What's happened will not go away, and I don't believe I can fix it, but at least I can try somehowâ€¦ go, see your family" he told her. She nodded and got up, then walked back towards the hangar she was

heading towards. Her entire fighter squadron, gone? She was hoping she would meet people just like her, who had the same dream she did of flying. How could twelve of humanity's best pilots die before they could even show what they're made of? She felt sad, even though she had never met them; she almost knew she would have been good friends with all of them.

She had heard the Spartans grouped together when not on missions, as if they were family. Considering they grew up together and were super soldiers, she could see that. She also could see she could have had the same feelings towards the now dead pilots if they had survived. They would have been a second family to her.

She walked into the hangar and talked to Ezekiel, who was helping prep two pelicans for launch.

"What are you doing here lass? I thought you'd be getting into the new pride and joy?" he asked her.

"We're not fighting today. I'm heading down with a pelican to help where I can in San Francisco, andâ€¦ to see my family" she told him. He nodded and smiled.

"I wouldn't expect anything else. I'd come with you, butâ€¦ you see, I'm getting on one of these as well. I've got to see my sister and her daughter. They're taking care of my son. He's two you know" he said and pulled out a small picture showing him.

"He's beautiful. What's his name?" she asked.

"Samuel. His mother wasâ€¦ his mother is with god nowâ€¦" he told her softly.

"He definitely has your eyes. Hey, get me a pelican, I'll fly you personally to where you need to go and then go see my own family, ok?" she asked.

"You got it! I've got one over there, and you'll never believe it's call sign" he said and looked over to the pelican, then back to her.

"Echo 2-1-2?" she asked. He nodded.

"I'll go get prepped" she told him and patted him on the shoulder. She walked over to the changing room and looked at her suit that was ready for her, but she ignored it. She didn't need it right now. She pulled on a standard flight suit and walked out, then picked up a flight helmet and got inside Echo 2-1-2. She looked around and saw her father's face flash through her mind. This wasn't the same pelican, but it was his call sign. She got into the cockpit and sat down slowly, looking around.

"Heheâ€¦ let's see if I remember how to do thisâ€¦" she smiled under her helmet, and went through her preflight check. She started up the engines while Ezekiel got into the Co-pilot's seat, and multiple marines climbed inside the cargo hold.

"\_Honor Bound \_CIC; this is Echo 2-1-2 prepping and ready for a hop. Launch order requested, how copy?" she asked.



"Good copy Echo 2-1-2, launch order is clear. You are next in line, on your go" CIC responded. She felt the platform move her forward through the bulkhead doors and heard them close behind her. The area depressurized and the outside doors opened. She lifted the pelican off the platform and flew towards Earth.

\*\*[2200 hours, December 13\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Andy was holding the hose and aimed it at the fire that was burning hot and flaring high on top of the house he was trying to douse with the water. His team member was right behind him helping him hold it as the water was on full blast. Multiple other fire engines were around doing the same.

"Don't we have an aerial coming in to drop on here soon?" he asked.

"No more. All of them are out of range doing search and rescue" his team member told him.

"Shitâ€¦ this fire isn't gonna stop unless we can get a foam ball in there" he gritted his teeth. As if on cue, a pelican flew over the top and opened its RORO. A large box canister fell out of the back and parachuted slowly, then opened its contents on top of the house, dousing it in a foamy lather. Everyone cheered as it dropped a good portion of the fires on the home, but there were still some small ones.

"Thanks for the drop pilot" Andy said over his coms.

"Anytime. I'll bring another in a minute" he heard over the channel. The voice. It couldn't be. He almost dropped the hose.

"Hey, what's wrong?" his team member asked.

"That couldn't beâ€¦ is it?" he asked himself. The pelican flew away towards some unknown landing zone to pick up another canister, which was soon loaded in by multiple marines and she took off again. The pelican flew over the home one more time and dropped the canister, the contents again spilling over the whole house and dousing the final flames. All that was left were bright charcoal bits and smoke. The pelican landed slowly in the street.

Andy ran towards it and went to the RORO, and as the pilot opened the cockpit door and walked out, he could almost tell who it was by her walk. She took her helmet off and ran to him then jumped, and he caught her midair and twirled her around him.

"God I was so afraid you were deadâ€¦" he whispered to her.

"I was worried about you too. I missed you" she whispered. He smiled and kissed her, and she kissed him back.

"Have you seen my mother? And Amber?" she asked.

"Both of them were evacuated to an underground bunker. They're fine last time I saw them. I saw your brother, I didn't know he was a marine" he chuckled. She looked at him strangely.

"A marine? Last I checked he was a security guard at some office building. He doesn't talk to us much though" she told him.

"Well, I saw him running around with marine battle armor and an assault rifle in hand, so I guess he changed professions" he told her.

"What rank?" she asked.

"Mmmm, I think Private First Class, but I don't know what the rank symbols look like. I'm pretty sure it was Private something" he told her. She sighed and shook her head.

"Idiotâ€¦ he always wasâ€¦ thanks. I know you need to get back to work, but laterâ€¦" she trailed off.

"Obviously. Are you back for good?" he asked.

"I don't know yet. I think so, but, things are a little hectic right now and we need to get SF under control. You know where I'll be once this is over" she told him. He nodded and pulled away from her almost painfully, afraid she'd disappear if he took his arms away from her. She smiled and walked back into the pelican and put her helmet on, then flew it away as he flipped his visor down and went back to work.

\*\*[0600 hours, December 14\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Elena slowly pushed the door open to the hangar and kicked aside some rubble. Her hangar was struck by a plasma torpedo, and took some damage, but was largely still intact. There was a gaping hole in the roof, but the damage missed the Esprit she found. The pelican was lucky, as the couch and TV and countertop was in shambles, and the second couch was burnt to the ground. She pushed aside some more pieces of the roof and walked across some broken glass, patting her pelican that sat obediently in the hangar, waiting for its master to come home.

"Hey there, guess you did what you could to survive as well" she whispered to it. She walked around the side and was stunned by what she saw. The ARGUS drone was hovering in the air, with three sleeping brutes on the ground. She felt pure fear as she saw them, but then relaxed a bit when she saw the amount of tranq darts the drone had fired into them and multiple Taser wounds. The drone was damaged, and barely keeping flying, and it most likely was running low on ammunition and power, but it was still in the air, and the brutes were out of the fight. She walked up to each of them with her M6C pistol, put it to their heads and fired one round into each of them, killing them.

She had never killed anything in her life, and being up close and doing it felt difficult for her to do, but she kept hold of the fact that she was a United Nations Air Force Lieutenant, that they had slaughtered millions and that these could have been the ones who killed her father and even other friends she had known in San Francisco. She walked over to the destroyed counter top and dug through the wreckage to find a paper towel roll, then cleaned herself off from the splatter of blood. She heard movement near the door and flipped around in a blur, aiming her pistol at the door and turning

on her night vision in her eyes.

"Whoa, it's just me hon" Andy said as he put his hands in the air. She sighed and lowered her weapon, then walked over to the drone and ordered it to sit on its recharge bed. It complied and silently flew through the air and landed effortlessly on the round large disc on the ground, then turned off. She walked over to it and opened up the ammo containers and checked the cartridge levels. One tranq dart left, and three Taser rounds. It wouldn't have survived for much longer if the brutes woke up.

What theâ€¦ brutes?" Andy saw the bodies and was shocked.

"Relax, they're dead" she told him and went to the pelican to pull out two new ammo containers for the drone. She would rather have it able to assist them if there were any more Covenant around Moffett Airfield.

"Theyâ€¦ all have head shotsâ€¦" Andy trailed off, and then looked at her.

"Yes, I killed them. Remember, I'm military now" she told him, and he nodded then gulped.

"Andy, you don't have to be afraid of-" she tried to tell him.

"I'm not afraid of you; I just didn't expect you to be soâ€¦ ruthless. I can see the tranq darts still hanging from their bodies, they were asleep weren't they?" he asked.

"They were the enemy! They have probably killed hundreds of people, and they would have killed you and me without any remorse!" she snapped at him. He took a step back and apologized.

"No, I'm sorry, I shouldn't haveâ€¦ I shouldn't have yelled at you. This has been a long day Andy. I'm just tired. They really would have killed us you know. The drone, it only had enough ammo for one brute if they woke up." He looked at the bodies then looked at her.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Tired, but fine" she told him and he walked up to her and held her in his arms. He kissed her forehead as they sat down in the cargo hold of the Esprit, and just relaxed there. She may not have been able to fight in the Covenant War, but she was finally able to get back to the people she cared about. She only hoped this would last for a good amount of time.

(Author's Note: Boo, I'm mean. No fighting at all, no actiony goodness. Elena doesn't even get to fire a shot (in the air) and just when she's ready to kick ass, her kick ass turns into "save me! I'm stupid and stayed in my home because I can't leave material possessions behind while these aliens invade!" But me being mean means Elena gets another dose of crap after this chapter. Sorry Elena \*Slaps Author\* that was uncalled for... \*another slap\* don't anger the gods! \*Lightning bolt. Elena dodges\* uh oh, gods can't aimâ€¦ \*runs\*)

Author's Note: AshleyBudrick's characters will be noted in this chapter. Thank you Ashley for letting me borrow them. I hope future chapters will have them show up without it interfering with her timeline.

\*\*[1340 hours, August 18\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Elena had been helping rebuild her civilian life with her mother. Her brother still hadn't come home after so long, so they figured he didn't want to be a part of their lives. Her mother still cared for her son, but he never responded to her.

Elena was still keeping up with her flying of the Black Blade, running escorts for pelicans up to newly assembled frigates. Most of the shipyards for anything larger than a frigate were destroyed or severely damaged, to stop a retaliation of some sort by the UNSC against the Covenant, however it would have been doubtful to have retaliated if the halo arrays were activated. They'd all be dead. She had participated in the March 3rd ceremony establishing the monument to the end of the Human-Covenant War. She flew a squadron of Long Swords overhead, and was the one who was ordered to break off in the Missing Man formation, in remembrance to the Master Chief.

Since then, she had stayed with her mother in her old room, carrying out different assignments where needed and talking with Dr. Wright involving how the project was going to continue. Despite severe cuts in funding for many other projects, and one Dr. Wright had heard a rumor of was the Spartan Project. She was shocked they'd consider it, but Dr. Wright was almost certain they'd leave it alone considering they were mankind's heroes. They were not cutting funding to Dr. Wright's project, as there was already a low amount to begin with, though they would not cancel it regardless due to Elena's contract with Marcus, and if she went, he went too. They did not want to lose one of their greatest minds in drone technology and nanite creation. He had married Jennifer three years ago, and was still good friends with Elena, as she helped with certain projects he would do in his garage, away from the company he was working for.

Andy was on call for a good portion of the time being a fire man, though what time he did have free he always spent with her. It seemed impossible at first with the reconstruction of San Francisco, the damage assessments and attempting to clear the few Covenant loyalist stragglers still hiding away, but they both eventually found time to be together. They were planning on getting married in a year, once everything had settled down.

"Raven 1-1, this is \_Riding The Light\_ CIC, we're getting unusual slip space readings, how copy?" she heard over her coms.

She checked her read outs in her eyes and looked around. She noticed a small light showing up in the distance. She magnified and immediately saw it was a slip space gate out.

"Good copy! We have an unknown gate out near the thermosphere, IFF ping is negative, it is not squawking! Request scramble of the 14th and 64th birds, intercept immediately" she told them and changed her trajectory, heading straight towards the slip space opening.

Suddenly, from the gate opening, a CCS Battle cruiser erupted from the hole, and seemed to be heading towards Earth.

"Scramble scramble! All fighters in the sky! Alert 5! Alert 5! All ships are coming to engage!" \_Riding The Light\_ responded. Two other frigates turned around and headed after Elena as she shot towards it. A plasma torpedo shot out towards her and she dodged around, then zipped up towards its belly and fired two specially modified missiles. They were equipped with something Marcus had invented, an anionic warhead that ignored shields, didn't even see them as it hit. The only problems were the yield wasn't very high, and it took multiple hits to breach a ship's hull, unless you struck just the right spot. Her shots were aiming towards the shield generators. She bursted away quickly as defense cannons opened up on her as three seraphs launched from the hangars. She furrowed her brow under her helmet. Only three? They'd have an entire wing coming out. Maybe they lost some in another battle?

She barrel rolled and slid towards the engines, noticing yellow blips showing up on her radar and knew back up was coming. She flipped around without even stopping, fired two more anionic missiles towards their engines, then engaged her own engines again, doing an acute angle trajectory change from where she was previously going. She went around the other side of the ship then followed the belly again, letting the seraphs take the long way around to find her, and doubled back to fire her last two anionics at the shield generator. The ship was equipped with multiple generators, usually one on each section to prevent an entire collapse of defenses, but she knew exactly which ones to hit as she had done her studying.

The missiles flew and detonated against the generator and in that section the shields collapsed. The shields protecting the engines. Lady Luck decided to be interesting that day, as just as Elena was going to make a run on the engines, two frigates fired their MACs and struck, punching clean through the engines and sending the Battle cruiser off course. The seraphs shot after her now, and the capital ship was no longer her concern, so she flew right towards one of the seraphs and unloaded with her Vulcans, and then slid by it within a few feet, and flipped the fighter. She already had a lock, and launched an air to air breach missile. Her previous spray had dropped its shields, but its armor was untouched. The missile flew and struck, penetrated, and detonated inside the seraph, sending it careening off the second and sending the second seraph slamming into the cruiser. The third came around for a second pass at her, but she had already started moving again, coming up right behind its angle zero "straight up its aft.

It tried to dodge her lock, but she wasn't using missiles. She gained a charge up light for the laser, and fired. The laser didn't show in space, but she could see the shields flicker on the seraph, then die, and a swath of burning go through the middle. The seraph continued forward, not changing its trajectory, the pilot most likely cut in half by the laser.

She turned around and just got a view of the cruiser falling through the atmosphere.

"Oh my god" it's going towards Los Angeles" we've got to warn them! All ships! We've got to try and deviate its path! We-" one

frigate CIC started ordering.

"Negative, it's too late. It's gonna hit" a Long Sword pilot softly said. They could see it exit the atmosphere, damage on all sides as parts blew off of it and headed towards a hill. Elena shot after it, entering the atmosphere, but knew she couldn't do anything to change its trajectory with her small craft. She was a surgical strike system, not a bludgeon. She could damage or even take out a ship of that size if she was given the time to hit critical systems, maybe get a breach at their reactor core and she knew she could do it, but she needed the chance to. This was a chance that was not given to her now.

She exited the atmosphere and slowed herself, seeing it crash into the ground, and saw multiple people running in different directions. Some were injured from the shockwave it produced as it slammed into the hillside, others were thrown entirely. She magnified onto different spots, checking for anything leaving. She was worried about what she had heard involving Africa, when a ship carrying the flood had crash landed. She didn't want that happening here.

"Raven 1-1, come back to the Riding The Light. Crews have already been sent by Lord Admiral Hood. What's your status, how copy?" she heard over the military band.

"Good copy, Raven 1-1 is green, no contacts notedâ€¦ hold on" she suddenly said as multiple warthogs rushed towards the ship followed by marines getting out. Two people seemed to walk up to the ship. Civilians? Wouldn't they be cordoned off from the area?

She stayed high as she watched, just as a brute and two grunts came out of the ship. An ODSST was standing nearby, and it looked like there was some talking going on. She couldn't tell what was happening, and saw the ODSST shoot one of the grunts. The Brute rushed them. One of the civilians, who she could have sworn she knew, dodged and pulled a pistol, then fired. The round punched into its head, and it dropped cleanly. The second grunt cowered, and then there was nothing.

"Raven 1-1, how copy? What's going on down there?" she heard.

"This is Raven 1-1, good copy, looked like there was some commotion that went on down there, it's all quiet now. I thought civilians weren't allowed near danger zones?" she asked.

"I thought so tooâ€¦ whaâ€¦ hold onâ€¦ I just got orders Lieutenant. You aren't gonna like this. You are not to tell anyone you saw those two civilians" she heard from CIC. She was confused.

"I'm sorry? Please repeat, I thought I heard you say no mention of civilians in the area, how copy?" she asked.

"Good copy Raven 1-1. Those two are special. It does not get put in a report understood?" CIC told her. She sighed.

"Understood. I thought I saw someone I knew thoughâ€¦ he looked a bit worse for wear, but I'm pretty sure it was him" she whispered.

"Again, you didn't see him Lieutenant. No one was there. You didn't

see the woman next to him" she heard.

"Copy that, returning to \_Riding The Light\_. Raven 1-1 leaving atmosphere" she said, and with that, she shot up and engaged her PDWEs and launched herself straight up, out of the atmosphere and to the frigate.

\*\*[1910 hours, October 31\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Elena was walking with Amber as she, and Jennifer, followed the kids running around getting candy at different houses. She was dressed up in a witch's costume, Amber in a fairy costume, and Jennifer as Super Woman. They chatted the entire time, telling the kids every so once in a while to not go into the street or don't run too far ahead.

"I swear; they don't need the sugar" Jennifer grumbled out.

"Lemme guess, you didn't bring a spatula with you?" Amber asked giggling.

"No, sadly I left it in my other tights" she laughed, and Elena chuckled.

"Hey, we were wondering something" Amber turned to face Elena after she stopped laughing.

"What's up?" she asked.

"We heard ODS Ts and marines were sent home on leave correct?" Amber asked her.

"Yes, but pilots are still needed. Without us no one gets anywhere or gains supplies for ships. I get to go home all the time, but I still wake up in the morning with orders, and stay overnight often enough on ships to still be in service" she told them.

"So, no leave?" they asked.

"Well, I guess I have some saved up, but with everything happening, I just never thought about it. I've been able to see you guys haven't I? I guess I never cared to use it if I can still hang out with you all and see Andy" she told them.

"Well, it would be nice to go on an all girl vacation or something. I wanna go off planet, maybeâ€¦ I wonder, did Roost survive?" Jennifer asked. Elena snapped her look to her friend quickly.

"Uhâ€¦ yeah, I think soâ€¦ I mean, why would you want to go there?" she asked slightly nervous. Did they know? She never told them anything about what she was doing now. It was all classified. The fighter they didn't even know about, her augmentations no one knew about except Dr. Wright or the people still at the Roost base.

"I heard it had a nice tropical resort there. We should go! Just us girls, we'll ask Maria to come too" Jennifer told her.

"It's nice, I mean, I've heard it's niceâ€¦" Elena said, looking at the kids running to another home.

"What's up with you? You're acting weird" Amber cocked an eyebrow and nudged her friend.

"Nothing, just thinking. I am a witch tonight right? I forgot my broom, should be flying through the air" she cackled, and both of her friends giggled.

"Knowing you, you could probably make the broom do that" Amber joked and punched her friend playfully.

"You never know!" she said with a finger brought to her lips and her eyes looking to the sky. They laughed and continued following the kids.

"Ok guys! It's time to go home! We're done here!" Jennifer yelled out. The kids groaned and whined, then came back as the women turned around and walked back the way they came.

Elena was able to fly back to her home in her pelican, and then entered her house.

"Ah, just in time" she heard come from the living room.

"Hey mom" she said as she walked into the living room and saw her mother talking with Dr. Wright sitting in a chair.

"Hello there my dear, how are you doing this spooky evening?" he asked smiling.

"Good, and yourself?" she asked.

"I am doing well, thank you for asking. I have good news. Um, may we talk somewhere in private? I apologize Ms. Gripen, thank you for the tea, it was delicious, um, where did you learn to make those cookies might I ask?" he said.

"Oh! I have a secret recipe, would you like a batch? I had a craving for them so I made some, but if you want some extras, I could whip them up" Elizabeth told him.

"Oh that's quite alright my dear; I simply wanted to know how you made them. You see, Anzac cookies are my favorites. The special ingredients allow it to hold together in packaging, allowing them to get to the soldiers during World War II when everything else turned into powder. They stay moist and in one piece" he told her. She looked surprised.

"Wow, you learn something new every day. Thank you for telling me that, I didn't know" she told him. He shook her hand and followed Elena upstairs. She closed her door and sat on her bed.

"So, what's going on?" she asked.

"I've been working on transferring other pilots with good skill into Raven Squadron, which, may turn out to be an entire wing, though a good portion of it will be support staff" he told her. She seemed surprised, and blinked a bit, then smiled.

"Are they like the pilots thatâ€¦ wellâ€¦" she didn't want to finish her sentence.



"They are good, but they were not watched over by the project. Their personalities would not exactly be similar to yours, just like everyone else would be different now. They all joined the military for one reason or another, and most of them did not do it simply for the love of flying. From what I've been able to see as well, most of them sadly do not have the genes to allow safe augmentation. They do some a few, but much less than the others did" he explained. He sat down in her desk chair.

"It, however, requires some training for cohesiveness. You see, they don't know you, and you are the leader for Raven Squadron, regardless of anyone saying otherwise. Now, unfortunately, the others, being accomplished pilots, believe they are being transferred into the new wing with intent on being promoted" he told her. She nodded listening to him.

"So, what? If they prove they can handle the leadership, I don't see a problem if they've earned it" she said.

"You've already proven it long before they did though Elena."

"It doesn't mean much to anyone who hasn't seen the accomplishments Dr. Wright. We've been hiding in the shadows this whole time last time I checked" she told him.

"Hmmm, you are right, which is why there is something planned for you" he told her. She cocked an eyebrow and stared at him.

"You see, this is where a test comes in. I have something special to have you do. I need you to head down to Vandenberg AFB and fly to a base in Florida. I know, Vandenberg AFB is your home turf, and I agree anything that you need to do should be done there or at Moffett Airfield, but this test I am going to have you do is being watched, to prove you have what it takes" he told her.

"By whom?" she asked.

"The Secretary of Defense of the UEG, James Rickenbacker. I shouldn't need to tell you how important this will be." Her eyes went wide.

"Whyâ€¦ whatâ€¦ ok, so this is a test? I thought I passed everything?" she asked, confused.

"You have. This is a special test I had to get going just for you. Things have becomeâ€¦ oddâ€¦ and I need you to go there. I cannot tell you more until we've reached the base. I'm sorry. Please do it?" he asked.

"Wait, I have a choice in the matter?" she asked.

"You've always had a choice in the matter my dear. I'm hoping you'll accept this" Dr. Wright said, with a hopeful look in his eyes. She sighed.

"Alright, when do we leave?" she asked.

"Tomorrow" he told her and got up to leave.

"Tomorrow? Oyâ€¦ so I do what, fly around for him, he likes me, he doesn't do mean nasty things to us later?" she asked.

"Something like that. As I said, I'll explain once we're there" he told her, and nodded to her.

"Sleep well Elena, we have a big day ahead of us" he said and told her his goodbyes.

\*\*[0400 hours, November 1\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, San Francisco]\*\*

Elena heard knocking at her door. She looked up at her clock and saw that it was four in the morning. She squinted and looked around. The knocking happened again. She slowly got out of bed and walked to the door.

"My dear, the time frame has changed" Dr. Wright said as she opened it.

"What? Dr. Wright, it's four in the damned morning! You said we leave later! How did youâ€¦ I don't even want to know" she said, then looked to her mother who was covered in a robe, looking rather annoyed. Two guards were standing behind Dr. Wright.

"I'm sorry my dear, it was not my choice. The test, the presentation, it was pushed up. We have to go now" he told her.

"What? Iâ€¦ godâ€¦ let me take a shower and get dressedâ€¦" she grumbled and closed the door. She took a shower quickly then dried her hair, and grabbed some military BDUs and put them on. She could care less if she didn't wear her dress uniform. She was pissed.

She opened the door and followed Dr. Wright to a limo waiting outside, then got in.

"And my things?" she asked.

"You won't need to have everything; you'll be put up in a hotel after the test and then leave the next day to come home. The Black Blade and your suit have already been transferred. All we need now is you" he said.

\*\*[0700 hours, November 1\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Florida Base]\*\*

Dr. Wright seemed queasy from the fast flight they had. The SCRAM jet they were in she knew all about, and didn't think much about the speed it reached to get them there. She went back to sleep the entire time, even when they landed. Dr. Wright looked ill from the g-forces and the suit he had to wear. The craft wasn't civilian, and was originally designed as a scout and observation craft to shoot over an area, gather as much information as it could before high tailing it past. Its initial design was based on the SR-71 blackbird, though significant improvements had been made in the past 500 years to it.

They landed quickly, and then got out of the jet. Elena followed Dr. Wright, who was being carried down the stairs somewhat by one of the guards.

"I think I'm fine now" he said as he patted the guard to let go.

"Alright, now, we need to get you into your suit quickly. Go to the changing room and get the suit on. I need to speak with Rickenbacker" he told her and she nodded and ran off. She entered through the door of what looked like a huge football stadium, but was in fact a launch area for multiple fighters and ships. She ran down a hallway and turned the corner, and nearly ran into a marine, though she rolled around her and continued on. She realized as she continued that the marine's face was the same one she had seen during the crashed ship incident near Los Angeles. She shook her head and continued running, not even out of breath when she reached the changing room. Inside, almost fully suited, was a Spartan. He turned around as the techs helped him finish the final seals and looked at her before he put his helmet on. The Master Chief. She blinked, and then realized why she was there. She went behind a curtain and a tech offered to help her get the suit on. She declined, and had the tech get out.

The tech complied, and she stripped quickly and slipped into the suit, then zipped up and locked her harness over. As she walked out from behind the curtains, the techs and the Master Chief stared at her, her suit still bulky at the moment. She activated the connection from her neural lace, and the suit suddenly shrunk around her, conforming somewhat to her body. All three techs blinked in surprise as she picked up her helmet and put it on. She took one last look at the Master Chief, now in new armor, before heading outside. She had no idea why the Spartan was there, only that she had orders and needed to complete them ASAP.

She ran outside and saw the Black Blade sitting on the run way. The entire area seemed empty, due mostly to the fact that most of the fleet was wiped out a year ago. She ran to the fighter and let the craft recognize its pilot, the cockpit opening on its hydraulics as she climbed up the steps, put her foot into a small foot hole in the side, and slipped inside. She did her preflight check quickly, made sure everything was ready to go, and made sure her engines were ready. She then closed her cockpit, expecting orders from the coms.

The Master Chief, as well as the marine, she had noticed Kilburn on her chest, walked out alongside the Secretary of Defense.

"Shitâ€¦| marines get to watch too?" she mumbled to herself.

"I would take a guess she's part of the security force for the area temporarily lass, most likely assisting the Spartan in protecting Rickenbacker" Ezekiel suddenly came over the coms.

"Zeks! You're here too?" she asked.

"Aye, I'm doing the maintenance remember? She's clear and good to go, but I need to tell you something important you're not going to like" he said sternly. She cocked her eyebrow inside her helmet and looked at the systems.

"What's that?" she asked.

"You aren't armed" he told her. She sat there silent and froze. No

weaponry? What's going on?

"I don't know what's being planned, but keep frosty and check your six girlie, I don't know what's going on here" he told her.

"Aren't you the one who loads munitions?" she asked.

"I got ordered not to" he responded.

James Rickenbacker and Dr. Wright seemed to be arguing near the edge of the safe zone, an area you stayed in if you were on foot to not get killed by shockwaves from exiting fighters on high speed lift off. The Master Chief was standing there not responding in any way, and Sergeant Kilburn stood there looking back and forth between the two men and her fighter. She then noticed the Sergeant turn to the Master Chief and say something, but she couldn't tell what it was. She sighed and sat there, waiting for orders.

Dr. Wright drooped his head and walked slightly towards her.

"Elena, this is Dr. Wright, can you hear me?" he asked over her channel.

"Good copy Dr. Wright, what's my status?" she asked.

"The test. You need to start the test. There are two waypoints you need to fly by and target, then fly away and move to the next waypoint. The second waypoint has multiple beacons you need to stay within a certain range for a specific amount of time to complete your objectives, and then fly back here and land. Do you understand?" he asked.

"Understood sir" she responded, and noticed the call he was makingâ€¦ the others could hear it. She was on a personal channel.

"Lieutenantâ€¦ there's a time limit" he told her.

"What's the time limit?" She asked.

"Five minutes" he told her. She was surprised, though it didn't seem that bad.

"When does the test start?" she asked. She heard a sigh on the other end.

"Thirty seconds ago" he told her.

\*\*[Music: Square Enix Music â€" Emil (Karma)\*\*

"Shit!" she yelled and punched the controls, launching herself high and pushing her throttle to the max.

She shot off like a rocket, fast climbing and aimed towards her first objective, targeting an object placed inside a base northeast of her. She flew towards it fast, but then found out she was being fired upon.

"You didn't tell me I was considered hostile!" she yelled, dodging the rounds as they flew, SAM sites locking on. She closed her wings

in and fired off her PDWEs, rocketing towards the base with missiles firing at her. She had recently had a chance to test a new laser targeting system that allowed her to connect to multiple forms of missiles and other ordinance and make sure it hit its target. She theorized she could retarget other missiles with it at the same time. She engaged the LLB and just as she aimed at a SAM launch, the missiles flipped and trailed, heading off in some random direction. It worked. She continued doing it as she raced towards the base, got a lock, then bled her speed and curved, heading towards her next objective.

She was already getting fire from that direction, and was evading. She analyzed the way the rounds were firing and the missiles tracking her before realizing they were anti air. She flew low to the deck and pushed her throttle hard, and aimed herself around the outside of the second base. She was going to slide around the edge, scanning all of the beacons at the same time in one move. She shot by one wall and angled herself, flying almost ten feet from the base defenses and scanning as she went. She picked up all of them except for one in the middle, so she broke off and shot outwards and up, straight to the clouds. Just as she reached them, she bled her speed and changed her direction at the same time, skating along the edge of the cloud and re-engaging her engines, firing her straight down towards the second base.

"She's insane!" she heard over the com channel, most likely the Secretary.

She shot like a demon straight towards the base, and could hear a collision alarm going off, but ignored it. Just as she was in range to start scanning, she bled her speed and fired her JTOL thrusters, pushing herself to a better angle to escape, and completed the scan just as she was over the base. She rocketed off again and followed the ground, trying to keep from taking any fire on her return. She noticed on her six three Long Swords following her, trying to shoot her out of the sky. She barrel rolled and bled speed right behind them, then just as they were breaking popped her PDWEs to full blast, and hit Mach just as she shot by them, knocking them off course and launching herself towards the landing runway. She wished she had some flares to pop for safe measure, but Ezekiel didn't load anything.

"She's coming in too fast! She's gonna crash!" Master Chief said, and just as she made her way to the runway, she hit JTOL and rotated her fighter in a 180 degree angle, knowing her landing gear was reinforced for hard deck drops. She ignored breaks as she pushed her throttle to maximum, sliding along the landing runway like an ice skater in reverse. She slowed to a halt, then disengaged her engines and JTOL thrusters and applied her break controls.

"Time!" she yelled.

"Three minutes twenty seconds. Add in the thirty seconds before, and it comes out to three minutes and fifty seconds. One Minute and ten seconds below the threshold" Dr. Wright told her and laughed. She opened the cockpit and waited for the stairs to come to her, then stepped out and down. She walked up to the small group and looked at the two men, almost ignoring the Master Chief and Sergeant Kilburn. She wanted to know if she passed.

Dr. Wright had the largest grin on his face, and Rickenbacker looked like the blood drained from his face.

"She finished it under the maximum time allotted James. I'd say she passed with flying colors" Dr. Wright told him smiling. Rickenbacker shook his head and blinked, then realized he had to say something.

"Lieutenant Elena Gripen. That wasâ€¦ impressive. The time I placed, I didn't believe it was possible, it was something I simply thought out there in hopes Daveth would cancel his request. I told him you had to do something amazing, and yet here you are doing just that" he told her. She looked between them, then at the other two nearby, and wondered what was next.

"I'll have the paperwork done on my desk by this afternoon" he told Dr. Wright just as another man came up to Rickenbacker.

"Sir! Sir! May I speak to you sir!" the man said as Rickenbacker turned around.

"Don't tell me Tyler! I don't care. It's possible and she passed my choice of exam. It's valid" he sternly told the other man.

"But sir! It's highly unusual for someone to jump so far up the rank and file so quickly! Skipping ranks that fast just isn't normal unless" Rickenbacker gave him a cold glare.

"I'll go get the paperwork written up for you to sign sir" Tyler gulped.

"Good. Congratulationsâ€¦ Lieutenant Colonel" he said, and Elena felt time stand still. She was being promoted?

"Sir?" she said, confusion in her voice.

"You heard me. That test was to see if you could adapt on the fly with multiple changes in the environment with no data given, no backup and no weaponry. And you exceeded all expectations. It has been an honor being able to witness that. Hell, I honestly wouldn't be surprised if I asked you to go Mach in a glider, you'd probably figure out how to do it. I'll have the change in rank finished by this afternoon" he told her. She suddenly realized he was expecting a salute, and she immediately complied, along with the Sergeant nearby and the Master Chief.

"At ease. Now, if you'll excuse me Daveth. There's no need for the escort you two, you're free to go as you please" he said and nodded to the Doctor. He walked away as Elena walked up slowly to Dr. Wright. They both watched him leave.

"Didâ€¦ what I think just happened actually happen or am I still in my bed dreaming?" she asked him still watching the receding view of the secretary.

"My dear, it really did happen. You're in command of the 988th Tactical wing, Ravens. It will comprise of the squadron you will be flying in, as well as the maintenance squadron, medical, support and logistics. It's quite a bit to control" he told her. She gawked, and thought he was crazy.

"But, I was just a Lieutenant before! I don't know the first thing about controlling a whole wing!" she told him.

"My dear, most of that will be run by people under you, don't worry. Your wing is being prepped well with what it requires to survive. You simply worry about flying, they'll do their jobs. You worry too much" he told her, grinning and patting her on the shoulder.

"Worrying has kept me alive this long" she told him.

"My dear, your skills have been keeping you alive this long, not worry. You must be tired. Go to the hotel and get some rest, you've earned it" he said, and she sighed and nodded.

"Dr. Wright" she started to ask.

"Elena. We've known each other for how long? When, I wonder when, are you going to call me Daveth?" he smiled at her and chuckled.

"Daveth" this was way out there, I mean" you couldn't have given me one hint about what I was walking into?" she asked seriously.

"I wasn't allowed to. It was on his terms. I believe the Master Chief here went through similar terms with a Colonel Ackerson in the past, did he not?" he said and turned to the Master Chief. He simply nodded, and the Sergeant next to him looked up at him with a look of surprise.

"You never told me that" she tried to whisper.

"You never asked. I didn't want to worry you" he responded back.

"However, this test seemed to turn out a bit better than his. He came out with some" oh" I'll shut up about that then" he mumbled at the end as he saw the both of them starting to argue quietly. Dr. Wright looked at Elena, who pointed at herself and mouthed "What, you want me to stop them?" and he nodded.

"Well is it causing any problems for you? Did it heal correctly? I need to know John" Kilburn asked. The Master Chief was showing in his movements slight changes in his stance Elena noticed, that he was in fact getting agitated over the questioning. Elena cleared her throat loudly toward them. Both of them shut up.

"Sorry ma'am" Master Chief said as both saluted.

"At ease. Sergeant Kilburn is it?" Elena said, attempting to put on some air of authority, despite the fact she had almost no experience in it.

"Yes ma'am" she responded.

"They wouldn't have allowed him back into a battle if he was incapable of fighting efficiently. The wounds he may have sustained during the test in the past for his armor have obviously healed. He's fine. End of story" she told the Sergeant. Kilburn nodded.

"Master Chief, your warranty long expired after the first scar you got in a fight. Don't test the theory that you can get another. I sure as hell don't want to do it for myself" she told him. He nodded in acknowledgement.

"Alright, I'm done right now with ordering people around. I'm tired, and this was veryâ€¦ annoying. Daveth, you said you wouldn't keep secrets from me" she said softly. He tried to object, but she just gave him this hurt stare.

"I am sorry my dear. It was for your own good" he replied, and suddenly couldn't meet her gaze anymore.

"Let me decide what's for my own good in the future please? It's my life, my body that has to go under fire, not yours" she told him, and with that, she walked away towards the changing rooms. Dr. Wright sighed and pulled down his glasses, and then rubbed his eyes.

"Alright, this has been completed, I guess we can all get some sleep or breakfast or something." Dr. Wright looked at the two standing there.

"How would you two like to join me for breakfast hmmm? I do enjoy the company."

\*\*[Six hours later]\*\*

Elena woke up in her room's bed. She looked around and saw the hotel she was in was furnished quite well. She rolled over and slid out of the bed, the sheets sliding from her body as she stretched and scratched her shoulder, then walked to the dresser for a new pair of clothes. She was provided some standard clothing to walk around in, some grey T-shirts and some blue cargo pants. A stack of underwear and bras were provided, nothing frilled or out of the ordinary. She didn't care, she was a pilot now.

She walked into the bathroom and stripped, then took a shower and reveled in the hot water. The warm liquid cascaded down her body as she thought through what she had gone through up until now. She had hoped she would have some time to relax with Andy, as well as her mother and her friends. Sadly, it was not the case. Dr. Wright had told her about an upcoming war that was brewing between the Elites and rebels on their home world. They were also still at war with the Brutes, and humanity was considered their allies so they had to respond.

Elena was annoyed with that. Humanity had been beaten down, lost countless lives and was barely even functional with its rag tag leftover colonies that were never hit, and the Elites, the ones who were the ones who killed so many of her people and enjoyed killing them, suddenly needed their help? She would rather they tear each other apart, but sadly it would still cause more problems for humanity in the long run. They had to come to Sangheilios and aid them.

She turned off the water and dried her body off, then sat down with a towel wrapped around her body. She wanted room service, and if she was being pulled out here for a test that could have killed her, she was getting food brought to her.



She called up the room service number and ordered lunch, a BLT with mayo and a bowl of roasted red pepper and tomato soup. For a side, she ordered potato salad and a bag of chips. For a drink, she ordered two colas and then ordered dessert, a block of Tiramisu cake and a bowl of sliced fruit. She also ordered an electrolyte drink, as Dr. Wright had always told her to have one nearby. She knew it was a lot, but her body was able to handle it easily since the augmentations. Dr. Wright had told her she went through more calories per day than anyone he had seen now, and she wondered if that involved the Spartans. It looked as if he had worked with them before, and she had seen what the Master Chief ate when she was younger. She had eaten that much before, though she wasn't as active as the Spartans in direct combat.

She thought back on what Dr. Wright had told her involving her body. The augments she was given allowed her to do amazing things, but it also made her eat through carbs and calories fairly quickly. She wondered why she didn't have to go to the bathroom so much if she ate as she did, and he told her that since her body needed to use everything that went down her throat far quicker than the average human being, she didn't produce as much biological waste. Some of the modifications had an extra bonus of cleansing the waste products far more efficiently in her body.

The food came up to her within a half hour and she opened the door after putting some clothes on. She thanked the server and ate her food quietly while watching the news. She suddenly heard a loud knock on the door.

"Davethâ€¦ seriously, I just need a bit of time to relaxâ€¦" she whispered to herself and got up to open the door.

"Well I'll beâ€¦ it really is you" she heard, and standing in front of her was Buck.

"Whaâ€¦ Buck? Well it's been a while!" she laughed and he smiled.

"You know, I thought you were all grown up back then, but wow, I didn't know you'd turn into this. Just wow" he said and looked her up and down.

"Um, aren't you with Veronica still?" she asked with a cocked eyebrow.

"Sorry, nothing meant by it missy, but I justâ€¦ I mean, you're all grown up! I thought you WERE grown up back then!" he told her smiling.

"Yeah, don't tell anyone about that ok? Dr. Wright set that one up, and Jack Gripen, he isâ€¦ he wasâ€¦ my father" she told him, her grin slowly shrinking to a small smile.

"Yeahâ€¦ I'm sorry about that, I heard about it when I came back from an opâ€¦ you have my condolences Elena" he told her and nodded.

"Thanks. What's happened has happened, I can't change that now, I can just do what I can for the future" she told him. He nodded.

"I hear that. Hey, it's really good to see you. I just found out you were here, and I just thought "No, Elena Gripen? I thought her name was-" he tried to tell her.

"Elena Esprit, I know, it's my mother's maiden name. It was to keep what was happening a secret" she told him.

"So, are you still secret? Should I even be talking to you?" he asked, and looked around for any guards.

"Well, I am a Lieutenant Colonel now" she told him and cocked an eyebrow. His eyes went wide and he immediately saluted.

"No, it's fine. At ease. Come on in and talk, it's been a while" she told him smiling.

"Sadly, I just stopped by to see if it was you. I gotta get back to my team and check on the gear we're being issued. Did you know they've upgraded the battle armor we're getting? Some sort of new layering. I wonder if it's the same armor type as the Mogglener the pasty faces wear" he asked.

"Ha-ha, that's MJOLNIR Buck, and your armor has something else. It's called magneto rheological fluid layering and Shear Thickening Fluid. I know about that Buck. I helped the man who is incorporating it into your armor" She told him. He gawked.

"A fighter pilot and a scientistâ€| you can cook too right?" he asked. She smirked.

"You know, my instructor asked the same question in the Academy. Yes, I can cook; no I'm not certified by the Culinary Institute of America. There's going to be a resin as well on top of your armor now too that can help deflect damage, and your Kevlar weaves are being reinforced with a different fiber. The ceramic armor layering is now going to be coated in tungsten to shield better against heat from plasma too. You'll also get a small exoskeleton attached to the legs to help with load distribution." She watched as his mouth fell open.

"In that case, to hell with the Spartan armor, I like mine just fine" he told her and grinned.

"I think the MJOLNIR has a few more levels of defense over what you have, but this should give you a much better fighting chance than before" she told him. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then thought better of it, and then opened his mouth again.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Is itâ€| well, is it just for ODSTs or?" he asked.

"Marines will get it too, though the ODSTs will be given a new cushioning gel padding under your armor now because of what you get to do" she giggled.

"Yeah, that should help immensely with shooting through the air at amazing speeds" he chuckled.

"No, I shoot through the air at amazing speeds, you just fall really fast" she said with emphasis on the "I". They both laughed.

"I ask cause there's a marine I'd rather help keep alive any way we can. She's a bit clumsy sometimes, so any help for her would be appreciated" he told her.

"Sergeant Kilburn I would guess?" Elena asked.

"Oh so you've met her?" Buck asked.

"I saw her at the exam, she was helping with the escort of the Secretary of Defense, James Rickenbacker. He got to watch me fly" she told him. He looked astonished.

"You know James Rickenbacker? Sheesh missy, you've got friends in high places. You've moved up in the world" he told her with a big grin on his face.

"I still remember where I came from Buck. I'm still the girl you knew on the Honor Bound, and I still love to fly" Elena said leaning against the door frame.

"God it's good to see you again. I hope we get to see you when we ship off for the Elite's home world. Heh, it'll be nice to have some air support that won't get shot out of the sky this time" he said grinning.

"Awww, well thanks for the vote of confidence" she smirked.

"I didn't mean it like that! I mean, well, it'll be nice to have air support for a change instead of trudging along getting shot at from all directions and not having the support we ground pounders would like from fighters or heavy armor. Damnâ€¦ you know I just thought of something? We're gonna be fighting alongside Elites, against Elites! This is gonna be weirdâ€¦" he said and rubbed the back of his neck.

"You're telling me Eddy. I still can't believe we're helping themâ€¦ but we go where we're ordered right?" she told him.

"Yup. Anyways, I'll see you later ok? It's really good to see you here." He leaned in to hug her, and she accepted and hugged him back.

"You know my email and my cell. Don't hesitate" she told him.

"Ha-ha! I have something to tell you. I lost the data pad in a fight a long time ago, so that's why I've never been able to send any messages or reply to any" he laughed.

"Are you serious? Hell, if that was the case, you could have just talked to my dad" she crossed her arms and smirked at him.

"Sorry, that thought never made it past testing" he said.

"Let me go write them down for you again" she said and left the door, running to a nightstand and scribbling on a piece of paper. She ran back to the door and handed it to him.

"Thanks! I promise I won't lose it this time. It was just either run like hell, or go pick it up and become a meal for some brute charging at me. I chose option 1 obviously" he told her.

"Yeah, I can see the reason. I found three brutes sleeping in my hangar at Moffett Airfield and had a choice between calling marines to secure them or shoot them. I didn't want to take the chance" she told him. His eyes went wide.

"You shot three brutes? By yourself?" he asked surprised.

"Yup. Headshots" she told him grinning and leading him on.

"Wow, you'd make one great Hell Jumper" he told her. She laughed.

"Granted though, the headshots were against sleeping brutes who were tranqed by my ARGUS drone which I left with its watch dog protocols initiated when I went to the Academy. I walked in and found it damaged and hovering, but all three brutes were tazed and tranqed on the ground." Buck looked around and chuckled.

"You know, I've had a chance to work with ARGUS drones once, and to that day I wish we had one issued to us on every mission we pull. Those things are so adaptable, it's unreal." She nodded in agreement.

"Hey, I just realized I know a Lieutenant Colonel by first name, does this mean I might get special treatment?" he asked with a wince showing on his face and a big smile.

"Don't push it Eddy, you're already getting help from me with new armor" she told him and winked.

"Eh, I was thinking more along the lines of overlooking us sneaking some booze or something on ships. But you have to watch out for your career now I know." He nodded to his own words.

"I'll think about it, depends on if your drunk on duty or not" she smirked. He pointed at himself and acted as if he was shot in the heart.

"Me? Do that? You obviously don't know me well enough to think I'd ever do that" he said.

"Have you?" she asked.

"Nope" he said smiling. "Good" she replied.

"Look, I'm sorry to rush, but I gotta head out. It was great seeing you again. Take care!" he said and waved goodbye as she returned the wave, he walking down the hallway and to the elevator.

"Bucky Bucky Bucky, always bouncing all over the place" she chuckled to herself then closed the door.

(Author's Note: So, this is a much smaller chapter, sorry for cutting it a bit short even though it's 8k words already.)

## 11. School is Now in Session

\*\*[0800 hours, November 10\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Florida Base]\*\*

Elena was working on her fighter, making sure it was at peak efficiency. She could almost sense it didn't need it, but she wanted to make sure. Ezekiel helped her with different log checks and ordinance rotation, checking weight distribution and effects it had on engine heat. Everything checked out. She wished she had the chance to work on the fighter at Vandenberg AFB, but Lord Admiral Hood requested her to work there, alongside other forces. She could tell she was brought there to mingle more than work, show her off so to speak. She was getting annoyed with being considered a trophy. She was there to fight and fly, not be watched by officials.

She had been wearing a full engineer's suit and mask the entire time to protect herself against the different chemicals they were using in the fighter. Some of the greases they used actually had a base that was very caustic, and could work their way into the skin and cause irritation or contact dermatitis. She had been introduced to Buck's new squad, and thought most of them were ok excluding Romeo. He got on her nerves way too fast. They were hanging around her while she did her checks, as they didn't have anything else to do at the moment until they were given orders to pack up. Everyone was getting ready to head to the new fleet being built, and then head out for another war they didn't want to fight. Morale seemed high but at the same time low. They liked having a job, but didn't want it involving aliens.

Renee sat talking to Buck on a crate saying "WARNING: HIGH EXPLOSIVE ORDINANCE. 20MM SABOT DO NOT LOAD WITHOUT EQUIPMENT BRACE 4-0B" on it, and Mickey was waving his hands around as he was included in the conversation. Elena seemed to like the marine sitting with them. She was a bit clumsy at times, but she tended to mean well and had a good head on her shoulders. Renee had absolutely no idea what Elena was saying sometimes involving flight statistics with Ezekiel, but she seemed genuinely interested in helping others, and made friends almost as fast as she did.

She suddenly sensed a pair of eyes on her, and realized Romeo was leaning against her fighter staring at her ass.

"You're right Mickey, very strong aft section" he said undressing her with his eyes. He didn't seem to realize she was a Colonel now, and could easily have him thrown in the brig for his harassment. The paperwork Rickenbacker had written involving her promotion was not in fact for a Lieutenant Colonel, but for a Full Bird Colonel. She didn't understand the deception, but Dr. Wright had calmed her down.

"I meant the fighter Romeo" Mickey grumbled.

"Romeo, I wouldn't get on her bad side. She's pretty capable of knocking you on your ass" Buck said.

"Hell, I would" Renee chipped in.

Elena sighed and opened her HUD in her eyes connected to her fighter.

She activated the ammunition loading door, and it quickly popped out and slid on small rails, whacking Romeo in the head and knocking him on his ass.

"Don't lean against equipment panels you don't understand Corporal, and get your head out of your ass. Go sit over there" she snapped at him as she turned around, and Romeo got to his feet holding his head and acknowledged. Everyone else was trying to contain their giggling.

"Nice one Colonel" Mickey said.

"What are you talking about? I was waiting for the panel to open and he happened to lean against it at the wrong time" she responded, and made a Spartan smile over her heavy wielding mask. Renee looked at her in surprise and copied her, and Elena looked astonished.

"You know about that?" Renee asked.

"John did it to me when I flew him down to Reach one time when I was younger, back when he was wearing the Mk IV suit. I figured it was a smile immediately so I use it once in a while when no one can see my face" she told her. Renee smiled and was lost in thought.

"I can't believe you knew him back then" she said, looking off into the distance.

"I didn't really know him, I just knew he existed and he was in my pelican. He alsoâ€¦" Elena trailed off as she remembered what he did for her.

"Also what?" Renee asked, looking curious.

"Nothing. Never mind, just thinking" she told her and chuckled. Renee shrugged and noticed as four Lieutenants from the Air Force started walking up behind them, lost in their own conversation. Dr. Wright was behind them.

"Hmm, new pilots?" Buck asked.

"I wonderâ€¦ did anyone see them come in?" she asked. Renee stood up.

"I saw them when I was heading from my quarters to see John. They had just arrived off a new transport from one of the new frigates I heard. Are they going to be under your command?" she asked.

"I don't know, did they talk to you at all?" Elena asked.

"One of them made a remark about my face, I know that. John wasn't very happy about that, and neither was I" Renee replied, and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Bad? Good remark? Perverted?" Elena asked. Renee made a hand gesture towards her hand involving pushing a column like object into her mouth. Elena frowned.

"I seeâ€¦ ok then. Let's see how they treat everyone here" Elena said and picked up a data pad near Renee. Buck stood up from his seat, and everyone could clearly see John and two other Spartans in the

distance, talking. Elena was the only one who could hear their conversation, but didn't really care since it involved close combat knife maneuvers. She guessed they were training for the next battle.

"And he said "Hey, I wasn't complimenting the car, but you can take that how you will"" one of the pilots said, and the others all laughed except for one, a woman.

"Gentlemen, and ladies, I asked you all here today to see how well you respond to a test. I need to see how cohesive you four are in a flight training simulation in live maneuvers. You four will be flying against another pilot, and your jobs will be to work together to take down the pilot in a mock battle using laser tracking systems" Dr. Wright told them, and looked at Elena out of the corner of his eyes. She faced him for a second before typing in some more things, and then asked Renee to verify an order she placed for a special ablative armor layering through Gavial Incorporated, the company that Marcus was working for. Renee nodded as she was a witness.

"You will be flying against a top class pilot, Ghost" he told them.

"I've heard of him, I don't think he's that good" one of them, Lieutenant Evan Jacobs Elena found out from her neural lace listing, scoffed and looked at his three friends.

"I don't know man, I hear he nearly took out a CCS Battle cruiser a while ago" another pilot, looking to be of African American decent, Lieutenant Zack Merricks said.

Renee suddenly looked at Elena with a look on her face asking "it was you dropping that one onto Los Angeles?" Elena sighed a bit, out of range of the pilots talking.

"Yeahâ€¦ sorryâ€¦ wasn't intentionalâ€¦ I didn't get a chance to knock its core off kilter, just disable its engine control" she said. Renee still stared at her.

"Again, sorry, didn't expect it to try and flatten you" she said.

"No harm done if I'm still alive right?" Renee punched her arm and smiled.

"Right, that would have been bad if you weren't" she giggled and Renee laughed.

"Umâ€¦ we don't have toâ€¦ we aren't being restricted are we? For flying I meanâ€¦" another pilot, a very soft spoken blonde with short hair said. Her name was Lieutenant Sarah Reist, and she looked very meek and timid near the other three. She seemed as tall as Renee, but had a completely different personality.

"Pfft, wouldn't matter with any restrictions Sarah, with four of us going against Ghost? We'll have him grounded in no time with our bad ass skills" Jacobs smirked and seemed to be expanding his ego.

"Him?" Elena whispered and Renee giggled.

"Should we go tell them, no, on second thought, let them figure it out for themselves" Buck said and clapped his hand onto Renee's shoulder.

"Alright, all of you, get prepped, you will be flying right after you are changed" Dr. Wright told them and nodded to each, then walked away.

"Alright, this will be great. I finally get to show what I'm really capable of. I'll lead us to victory guys, no worries!" Jacobs smiled to everyone in his little group.

"If you don't get us killed" another pilot said. He had black greased hair with his bangs hanging down around his temples, and his name was Lieutenant David Roberts. Elena noticed he had very striking green eyes and was fairly hansom with a strong jaw and slightly pronounced cleft in his chin.

"Are you kidding me? You think you could do better?" Jacob asked.

"I think what we need is a plan. Ghost didn't get his legendary status just by getting lucky, and if we don't work together well, he'll eat us for lunch" Robert told them.

"Robby Robby Robby. That's why I'm here. I'm your ace in the hole. Don't worry little man, we'll do just fine" Jacobs told him.

"Can we stop this argument and get up in the air? We got orders guys" Merricks told them. They both agreed.

"Hey, hey you!" Jacobs turned around and pointed to Elena. Renee backed up as did Buck when Elena pointed at herself.

"I don't see any other weird techs standing around here do you? Get my fighter ready for me while I go get changed" he ordered. She tilted her head back a bit, astonished with his gall.

\_If he's in my wing, I'm breaking him of that first chance I get\_ she thought.

"Go on, hop to" he said as the pilots walked away to the changing rooms.

"Wow, ego much?" Renee said.

"Seriously, that guy needs to be taken down a notch" Buck said, annoyed.

"I could always-" Mickey started to say.

"No! No sabotage, I can handle this, but thanks for the offer" Elena told him.

"I was just gonna offer to put Brute in one of their cockpits" Mickey grumbled.

"Who's Brute?" Elena asked.

"Our ODSST mascot! He's a cat we found" Mickey told her. Elena looked



at Renee and Buck. Both of them put their hand up and didn't want to get into it.

"Okâ€¦ I don't think that would be too nice for Brute, again, thanks for the offer though" she said.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Buck asked.

"Can you drive a tug to get their fighters out here?" Elena asked.

"I'll go grab one of them right now lass" Ezekiel said.

"Thank Zeks" Elena said and looked at the others.

"Never done it before, but it can't be too hard right? Are they already attached?" Buck asked.

"Should be. They're in the hangars, just go over and offer to the hangar and tell the techs to pull them onto the runway." Renee, Buck and Mickey nodded and ran towards the hangars and Elena closed her panels. Romeo just walked off.

"Guess he's not interested in helpingâ€¦" she whispered to herself as she cleared all logs and locked her fighter down. Things were about to get interesting.

She walked into the changing rooms and saw the four pilots getting into their G suits. All of them were wearing the same suit she wore.

"Their suits are dumbed down versions of yours if you're wondering" Dr. Wright said behind her, though she knew he was walking up.

"So they don't have the same augments?" she asked.

"Not a one. I was thinking we could do it, however, I checked their DNA logs. Sadly, they have only a few of the genes required. We could do some of them, but the few we could do would only make minor differences. Robert is the only one that seems to have the most compatible genes, and he only comes in with five. The others are compatible for only three" He told her.

"That Jacobs needs to be broken" she told him.

"I would highly agree, which is why I didn't acknowledge you back there. I assume you have a plan?" he asked smiling.

"Yup. Once they leave, I'm going in and changing, then you are going to let them take off before I do. Then the schooling begins" she told him.

"Do me a favor my dear? Try and be nice to Sarah and the others once you're done. She has had a bit of a hard life before she became a pilot, hence herâ€¦ disposition. She still flies very well, but she is a bit introverted when it comes to social interaction" he told her.

"I'll do my best" she told him and looked back to the changing room. The four pilots were fully suited up and walking out another

door.

"You always do" Dr. Wright said and walked away. Elena walked into the changing room and locked both doors, then stripped her heavy engineer suit and slipped into her flight suit. She sealed it and activated its conforming controls, then put her hair into a bun. She then took her helmet and sealed it over her head.

The four pilots walked out onto the runway, seeing their fighters waiting for them.

"Good, I guess the tech did what he was supposed to" Jacobs said.

"He did his job not because you told him Jacobs, he did it because of what the job description states" Roberts said as he walked to his fighter.

"Jealous you didn't order him?" Jacobs asked.

"Cool it you two, we should be figuring out a way to handle Ghost in the sky, not fighting amongst ourselves" Merricks told them as he slipped into his cockpit.

"Right right, Roberts, I am willing to put this aside if you are" Jacobs said and put his hand out to shake. Roberts looked at it, then at Jacobs, and then shook his hand. Jacobs smiled and walked to his own fighter as Roberts got in his. Sarah walked up to Renee who had just walked by with the tech that had moved her fighter.

"Umâ€¦ I was wondering, would youâ€¦ umâ€¦ would you please get the stairs for me?" she asked softly. Renee looked a little surprised, but nodded and looked around. She saw a rolling staircase nearby and walked over to it with the tech as Sarah checked her landing gear and the laser targeting systems. Renee rolled it over with the tech's help and placed it right next to the cockpit.

"Umâ€¦ Thank you kindly" Sarah said and put her helmet on, then climbed up the staircase and into her cockpit. Renee removed the staircase and the tech made sure the tug was completely out of the way. Sarah gave her a thumbs up as she closed the cockpit, and Renee walked back out of the area to the safe zone, catching up with Buck and Mickey and Ezekiel.

"So, what do you think is gonna happen?" Mickey asked as they all stood there watching.

"I think she's gonna kick their arse, that's what I think is gonna happen boyo!" Ezekiel said and chuckled.

"You know, I bet on Elena a long time ago and lost, and she was flying a crappy tin can compared to what she's got now against a Sabre. She's gonna wipe the floor with them" Buck said and nudged Renee.

"We'll wait and see" she replied and watched as they all launched. Elena walked out of the building and to her own fighter.

"Go get em Ghost!" Mickey yelled out. She looked at him and gave him a thumbs up, then turned back and got into her own fighter and closed

the cockpit.

"Raven 1-1 ready to launch Florida BaseCOM, how copy?" she said as she finished her preflight quickly.

"Good copy Raven 1-1. Decks yours. Try to bring them back in one piece" she heard. Even the COM tower knew she was going to beat them.

"No guarantees" she said and engaged her engines. She shot up and immediately engaged her photo cell panels, providing a stealth launch in a way along with stopping her radar ping.

"Nose is cold for lift off, will re-engage once I have gone loud" Elena said as she rocketed off into the sky, almost disappearing halfway as the four soldiers on the ground lost sight of her. All four of them ran towards the tower. They wanted a show.

\*\*[0820 hours, November 10\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Florida Base Air Space]\*\*

"Is anybody getting a reading in the sky?" Jacobs asked.

"Nothing. Maybe Ghost is just that, a Ghost" Merricks said.

"He can't be invisible, there's just no way. Our sensors would be able to track him if he's using anything like active camouflage. This is getting boring. Maybe he chickened out cause of seeing us four" Jacobs said and laughed.

"Doubtful. Keep your eyes peeled everyone" Roberts told them.

"Umâ€¦ while we're waitingâ€¦ doesâ€¦ would it be ok if I played a tiny bit of music? Itâ€¦ tends to get me ready for flyingâ€¦" Sarah softly said over the coms. Her voice was almost like wind. Everyone agreed and she turned on a small song of a flute playing with a violin. Jacobs overrode the song.

"Hey! What the hell man? Why'd you do that to her?" Merricks snapped.

"If you wanna get into the feel for flying, this is the music you need to listen to" Jacobs said.

Jacobs turned something on and everyone immediately was in disgust. He was playing a very old song from some movie in the past, Danger Zone by Kenny Loggins.

"God! Where the hell did you get that horrible music?" Merricks asked.

"What? It gets me in the groove of this! Highway to the Danger Zone! Badam dam! Ride into the Danger ZoOone! Headin into twilight, spreadin out her wings tonight!" he started singing to himself. Everyone was annoyed now. Including Elena. She happened to be listening to the whole conversation. Apparently they didn't remember their training involving get off of standard channels and move to a private com for training sessions. Time to teach them.

"Hey, my music just shut off!" Jacobs said as his music sputtered and

was disabled.

"Thank god" Roberts grumbled.

"Please tell me there's better music than that" Merricks replied.

\*\*[Music: Flogging Molly "Devil's Dance Floor]\*\*

"There is" Elena whispered to herself as she turned on a song and broadcast it to the rest, just as she shot out from the clouds straight at them.

"What the, I've got an IFF ping!" Merricks said just as a tone struck. Elena already had a lock on him as she shot out from hiding in the clouds.

"Shit!" Merricks said and was already out of the fight. The other three broke formation and tried to maneuver as Elena shot after Sarah.

"He's on me!" she said as she tried to evade the second lock, Elena keeping with each move she made.

"I'll try and catch him from behind! Just keep him occupied!" Jacobs told her as he came to assist. He got right behind Elena.

\_If you want to be next, sure why not\_ Elena thought and smirked. She bled her speed and barrel rolled, right behind him and swapped her lock to him.

"Oh son of aâ€¦" he said and the tone kicked in. He was dead.

Elena shot forward and continued with her attack on Sarah as she swooped towards the ground.

"I can't shake him!" she almost cried.

"Hang on!" Roberts replied as he swooped after, straight towards Elena.

\_He's got some guts, I'll give him that\_ she thought and bled her speed again, but only just enough to lead him into her front and come at her, before she hit the throttle and charged him.

"What theâ€¦ he's insane! Collision!" he said and broke his attack before he could get a lock, and Elena dove softly, five feet from the ground and still chasing Sarah. Sarah shot towards a cliff and down it, hoping to lose Elena. Elena decided instead of following her to follow the cliff side, knowing almost exactly what she'd do. Sarah banked right quickly and followed the cliff side, hoping to stay unnoticed near it. Elena was right on top of her, tracking her the whole way while she was close enough to the ground for sensor pings on her to be ignored as rocks and terrain.

"I think I lost him" she said as she pulled up and over the cliff. Right in front of Elena. She didn't even move, she already had tone.

"He got me!" Sarah screamed. Elena shot up and followed Roberts's

signal. Roberts did everything he could to keep her away from him, and was actually doing a fairly decent job of dodging her lock.

\_He's not bad, still rough, but not bad\_ she thought. He bled his speed to try and get behind Elena, but she broke her attack and popped her JTOL systems, flipping herself upside down and aiming right at him.

"Shit!" he yelled and immediately dove. She chased after him as he headed towards the base, swerving through the buildings keeping her off him. She followed almost lazily, as she already knew the layout of the base. She made it a point to memorize each base she stayed at, in the event there ever was an attack to get outside quickly.

Renee and the others watched as Roberts buzzed the tower, shooting right by fast and hard as Elena was hot on his heels.

"They woke up a giant they did" Ezekiel said and smirked.

"Think he has a chance of winning?" Renee asked.

"Are you kiddin me lass? As soon as she gets bored, he's got a lock on him. I've seen her do that before. She's playing with him. Like a cat with a mouse. I'd give him another minute, maybe less before she gets tired and drops him" he told her with a grin, and tousled her hair. She reached up quickly to stop his hand and laughed as the small group that was in the tower turned into a much larger group, and even John and Kelly came to watch.

Elena zipped after Roberts as he tried to climb, straight up to the clouds. He barrel rolled and angled as best he could, dodging her lock. She could have easily gotten one but she decided to use what they had. They didn't have her ocular enhancements or her modified neural lace or her cortex scanner. She was handicapping herself and she was still winning.

\_He's gonna try and pull what I pulledâ€¦\_|\_ she thought in surprise. He climbed to the clouds and got inside, trying to hide from her.

\_Not good enough\_ she thought again and flashed her laser targeting system in a splayed ping arc, just bouncing the thing off of his hull to see where he was.

"Oh shit, he already found me?" he said.

"Try and head towards the sun! Use it as a back drop!" Jacobs suddenly said.

"Hey! You can't help him! You're dead!" Merricks said.

"To hell with it! Take him down!" Jacobs yelled. Roberts grumbled. It could disqualify him if he attempted it. He decided to go along with the idea and shot out of the clouds, then flipped his fighter and headed straight down as Elena came up. Even though she knew where he was, he knew where she had scanned him from, and he was trying to get a lock on her.

"I think I've got him!" Roberts said. Elena smirked. \_Not in your

life time.\_

She fired her laser targeting at his own beam emitters and screwed up the designation.

"What theâ€¦ that's not possible!" He said to himself. She then rapidly swapped her radar and sensors on and off to further throw off his lock, as it slowed the process with a constant change of IFF signals. She was still climbing right towards him. He immediately broke off his chicken run, not wanting to crash into "Ghost."

Elena followed his movements, wanting to scare him.

"Oh shit! He's moving the same way!" he said as in slow motion, he expected to slam right into the other fighter. Elena flipped upside down and flew right over him, barely a foot from his cockpit. He nearly lost bladder control. She could have waggled her eyebrows at him.

Elena cut her engines and engaged JTOL thrusters, flipping herself silently and effortlessly as she climbed into the air still with momentum while she locked onto him, almost like a fairy dancing on the head of a pin. She was dancing a ballet. She hadn't even begun a salsa.

"Congratulations all of you, you have all been killed by one pilot" Dr. Wright said over the coms.

"Fuck" Roberts grumbled and headed towards the base slower now, Ghost taking up a position right behind and near his wing. Sarah joined up and Merricks followed. Jacobs begrudgingly fell in line.

"Well, umâ€¦ we did our best right?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah Sarahâ€¦ we did our best, that's what counts" Roberts said.

"Damn he's good" Merricks whispered.

"No he's not! There'sâ€¦ there's just something wrong with our fighters! He must have sabotaged them or something! The tech! the tech might have done something!" Jacobs growled out.

"Land and prep for debriefing" the Tower said. Everyone in the tower was cheering as Elena broke off from the team and landed on her own runway, and just to add insult to injury, parallel parked her fighter between two pelicans.

"Oh now that's just showing off" Roberts said.

They all got out of their fighters and took their helmets off. Dr. Wright and the others walked up to them.

"Great, so we had an audience to the whole thing" Merricks grumbled.

"Well, weâ€¦ didn't do that bad did we?" Sarah squeaked out.

"No, you did fine Sarah. It was to be expected you would lose to your commander" Dr. Wright said.

"COMMANDER?" they all said in unison. Elena walked up to them coming from her fighter, and they saw her bust through her suit. She took her helmet off and undid the bun for her hair.

"What theâ€¦ he's a she?" Jacobs gawked.

"Colonel Elena Gripen is your superior Lieutenant Jacobs, show some respect" Dr. Wright said, with a large grin on his face.

They all looked at each other and then at Elena.

"Lieutenant Reist, you're evasion is good but you have no aggressive stance to speak of, stop running and try and figure out how to get back at the enemy. Lieutenant Merricks, you need to check your six far more often; that was too easy to get the drop on you. Jacobsâ€¦ kill the ego, or I'll kill it for you. That was pathetic; you made it far too easy to catch you off guard in your attempt to make yourself look good. Robertsâ€¦" Elena turned to each pilot, telling them what they did wrong. Everyone looked at David.

"Roberts did ok at the end. However Roberts, I wrote that maneuver. When I was thirteen" she told him. They gawked at her.

"Wrote the maneuverâ€¦ how long have you been flying?" Roberts asked.

"Since she was thirteen, did you not listen to her Lieutenant?" Ezekiel said.

"You're coordination was horrible, all of your chances to try and track me were not even taken, and you failed at doing the one thing you should have done: Watch your wingman's ass. Two by two, and you should have worked far better to close on me. And get off the standard channels when you fly training, that music was god awful." Elena looked between each of them as they stood at attention.

"Well that's it. You're dismissed" she told them and they saluted her. She saluted back nonchalantly as they walked away.

"Oh, Jacobs. You say anything about another woman's body while in my wing again, I'll have you in the brig so fast it'll make your head spin" Elena growled out. Jacobs apologized and looked at Renee. John crossed his arms over his chest, and everyone could hear the knuckles cracking from him just making fists while doing so. The pilots walked back to the changing rooms, and Elena saw Roberts slap Jacobs upside the head.

"Nice one dumb ass" she heard him say.

"You enjoyed that didn't you?" Buck asked.

"Quite. Now, shows over folks, nothing to see here. Go back to your lives and what you were doing" she said to everyone as they clapped and cheered. She sighed and curtsied to all of them and Renee and the ODSs laughed.

"And this is why you never piss off a Ghost" Buck told Renee. She nodded in agreement. A fact had just been stated for the marine. Elena was an invisible angel of death in the sky. Another fact she

noticed was Elena looked out for anyone who was lower rank. She wasn't a cruel task master. Renee had new found respect for the pilot. Even Kelly was surprised inside the tower while watching the show.

\*\*[1800 hours, November 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Florida Base]\*\*

Elena was getting tired of training the four pilots. They had more experience in fighting than she did because they were older than her, with the exception of Sarah. She was barely out of the Academy. All of them had seen combat during the battle for Earth however, and she was still in transit. Each of them had already gained a kill from a Seraph and some banshees, but she was the only one who could rightfully claim three Seraph kills and a CCS Battle cruiser take down. She obviously had help from some frigates, but she knew given time without the support she would have eventually de-stabilized the reactor core and blown the thing to kingdom come.

What she was most getting annoyed with was the fact that Jacobs always seemed to be trying to lead them, despite the fact he was a 2nd Lieutenant. Even Roberts was a 1st Lieutenant, and there were other pilots being brought into the wing to fill it out. Elena dreaded reading one of the files that was put on her data pad for her review. Lieutenant Ackerson. He was shot down right after launching during the Battle of Earth. He survived easily, as he wasn't that far from the ground, though she really didn't want him in her wing. Maybe they figured some of her skill would rub off on him, she didn't know. She still felt sorry for him though, as his father was decapitated while being held prisoner by brutes, and his uncle used himself as a tracking device for a MAC platform to knock a Covenant ship from the sky.

Elena was annoyed with her rank at the moment. She had authority over her wing when deployed anywhere, and no Ship Captain could tell her pilots what to do unless there was express permission. She still didn't understand what she considered a typo for her rank. She was annoyed for the one fact that everyone seemed to expect her to build experienced pilots with already set attitudes and their own ways of flying into something of an elite strike team.

"Hey Elena" Renee said as she walked up to her sitting on a couch in a waiting room.

"Hey Renee. What are you doing? I thought all marine forces were heading down to the DFAC" she asked.

"Buck asked me to come find you quick. Still going over your roster?" Renee Asked.

"Yeahâ€¦| was your roster so bad when you got it?" Elena asked her. Renee looked off towards the ceiling.

"I have a private that is even clumsier than I am, and a corporal that keeps playing with knives. Mmmm, that's about it from what I've noticed. Why, should I be keeping a better eye on them?" she asked.

"No, well, not in that regard. I'm not trying to look at their problems; I'm just trying to see what I can do with them. Look at



this. One of my reviews and a chance to accept him as a transfer. Lieutenant Killinger. Long Sword pilot. He's been demoted twice for disobeying orders to act like a hero, and then finding out that the people he was going off to save were already getting evac'd off the ground. Seriously? I do not need people who run and gun and ignore what I tell them. I'm surprised he hasn't been court martialed and dishonorably discharged" she said and declined the transfer.

"I agree, but I don't really have much experience in command. I haven't really had a chance give any orders. I don't really know how I should act you know?" Renee told her.

"Just remember your training, watch what your men or women do, keep them in line and remember it's their job to fight, your job to fight as well as keep them alive. You now have a reputation to keep that started once you got them under your command. They shoot, you shoot until something else happens, then you figure out how to fix whatever it is, and then go back to shooting. If you can't fix whatever it is, you go to the Lieutenant nearby and have him figure it out. It's what they're there for" Elena told her.

"Alright, I guess I can do that" Renee said with some confidence showing on her face. "Thanks."

"What, thank me? I'm just spouting what I think should work, don't expect me to be the end all be all for advice Ren. I became a Lieutenant Colonel less than a month ago remember? And then I find out I became a Colonel instead. And I don't even have a full roster yet. I thought Daveth said I didn't have to worry about thisâ€¦ and now guess what? I'm worrying about it" she grumbled. Renee looked genuinely surprised.

"Aren't you happy about that?" she asked.

"Depends. Now I have even more responsibility. How do you screw up a rank application? Correction, how does the Secretary of Defense, the head honcho himself, screw up a rank application?" she asked Renee.

"Maybe he was really impressed with your flying and decided to see if you could handle the whole thing?" she replied, cocking her eyebrow.

"Maybeâ€¦ still, having Daveth blurt out I'm a Colonel while I'm stepping out of my quarters was the weirdest thing I've ever had happen. I just walk out and "Hey my dear! Change of plans! You're a Colonel!" and I'm like "I know that Doctor" and he just goes "no, I don't think you understand, a Full Bird Colonel" I had no words to say after that" Elena told her. Renee laughed.

"Well from what I'm seeing, you're taking it really well. You seem like a natural for this kind of thing" Renee said and patted her on the shoulder.

"I'm doing touch and go right now are you kidding me? You could tell me my duty was to pants every General in the UNSC and I'd think that was one of my jobs" she said. Renee giggled.

"We'll both get the hang of it, it'll just take time right?" she said.

"Right" Elena said, and sighed. "I'm done; I'm absolutely done with this. Let's go be cheerful, cause I'm getting pissed at this roster. Happy Thanksgiving Sergeant Kilburn" Elena said and saluted Renee.

"Happy Thanksgiving Colonel Gripen" Renee said and gave her a crisp salute. They both giggled and walked down the hallway towards the mess halls.

\*\*[Five minutes later]\*\*

Elena walked into the DFAC and suddenly everyone stood up.

"OFFICER ON DECK!" was bellowed throughout the room as everyone shot to their feet at attention.

"At ease" she said and continued down an isle of benches and towards another door.

"You're not eating with us Elena?" Renee asked.

"There's an Admiral's Club outside here remember?" she replied and smiled.

"Oh. I forgot about that. With you being a Colonelâ€¦ yeahâ€¦" Renee trailed off and realized that Buck had sent her out for nothing. Renee would be eating with the rest of the NCOs, while Elena would be sitting with Captains and Admirals potentially carving a turkey and having conversations about how the new wine crops are growing.

"Well, I hope you have a good time in there" Renee said with a smile. Elena nodded and walked through the door, and Renee turned around and headed back to the table she was sitting at with Buck and John. Five minutes later, Elena walked back out and got in line for food.

"What theâ€¦ she's eating with us?" Buck suddenly said and Renee turned around and saw her in line. People were jumping out of the way for her and being highly confused at her being there, as she gathered some food and walked to their table.

"Is there still room for me?" she asked.

"Sure! Of course!" Buck said and scooted down. Elena sat down and looked at all of them.

"What? They were smoking cigars in there. I hate cigars" she said and screwed her cap off her eggnog. Everyone just smiled and nodded and went back to eating their food, starting up a small conversation about random things.

"Colonel Gripen" a voice said from behind. There was silence at her table as a Commander was tapping her on her shoulder.

"Yes Commander?" she asked looking up at him.

"The Admiral's Club would very much like it if you joined them forâ€¦ some cultural amenities" he said, feeling awkward that he got sent out to talk to her.

"Cigars you mean? And lemme guess, Scotch?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am" he replied.

"I'm not interested, but thank you very much for the offer. Cigars and Scotch are not my thing" she said and smiled at him.

"Understood ma'am" he said and walked towards the club. Everyone looked at her.

"What? It isn't. They don't get to order me around, the only one in there is Lord Admiral Hood, and I've already knocked him down a peg once since I've been here involving Rickenbacker. They're afraid of me, and for good reason. I remember being a Cadet, and being a Lieutenant. I'm not going to change, no matter what." Everyone brought their glasses of eggnog up and toasted her.

"To the Colonel that sits with the Sergeants, here here" Buck said and everyone acknowledged.

"So, would this mean we might get special treatment?" Mickey asked.

"I already asked that Mickey. Watch how you act around her" Buck said.

"Sorry, was just asking" Mickey rolled his eyes.

"It depends on the circumstances Mickey. Don't try and do anything stupid, and you'd be surprised what most officers will let you get away with" Elena told him.

"Which is pretty much everything he does" Dutch said. Everyone laughed.

"Oh, Master Chief, errâ€¦ you know, I still find it weird calling you by your name" Elena said. John made a small smile towards her, and Renee nudged him.

"It's alright Colonel, you know me by my rank" John told her.

"You can call me Elena if I can call you John" she said with a smile.

"Alright, Elena" he said.

"See, we're one big happy family" Buck said.

"That shoots high explosives on a daily basis and turns things into fine pink mist every minute" Elena said. Everyone chuckled, including John.

"That's a great thing to put in a job title. "I'm an ODST! I make things go boom!" I can see the manager's eyes" Dutch joked. Everyone laughed.

"I make things go away" Elena said.

"How do you make them go away?" Mickey asked.

"By shooting a missile at them. It's what happens to everything I hit with a missile. It goes away" she said. Everyone laughed again.

"What happens if it doesn't go away like you expected it to?" Dutch asked.

"Then whoever I just hit has a really bad headache and has realized don't fuck with me. They usually realize the 'don't fuck with me' thought after I've fired another missile though" Elena told them as she looked off towards the ceiling and smirked. Everyone giggled.

"Hey, shouldn't the ranking officer in the room say a speech or something for today?" Buck asked.

"Alright, that's enough Sergeant" John said.

"What? Shouldn't she? Oh come on, please?" Buck asked.

"Eddy, I think you're asking a bit too much from the Colonel here. This might be why they hide from us in the Admiral's Club" Renee said and winked at Elena. Someone heard Buck talk about a speech, and everyone in the room started to chant speech! Speech! Speech!

Elena put her hands up and stood up.

"Well, let's seeâ€¦" she started.

"Bad speech!" someone yelled from the back. Everyone laughed.

"May your stuffing be tasty, may your turkey be plump, and may your potatoes and gravy have nary a lump" she started, and everyone laughed.

"May your yams be delicious, and your pies take the prize, and may your Thanksgiving dinner stay off your thighs!" she finished. Everyone laughed again and applauded. She sat down and smiled as she noticed Dutch had sprayed some eggnog on the table as he was drinking it while she gave her speech. "Happy Thanksgiving everyone" she said and they all pushed their glasses in the air in agreement.

"A bit of a leak there Corporal?" she chuckled.

"Sorry ma'am" he smiled back.

"It's all in fun" she replied back. They finished their food and cleaned their table, then walked out of the dining room.

"Oh, I think the turkey is gonna drop me for some shut eye" Buck said as he burped a bit. Just then Veronica walked out of the Admiral's Club and saw Elena.

"You mind explaining to me why you didn't join us in there? I was all alone with those pompous swaggering know-nothings" she said.

"I didn't force you to stay in there Captain, and I don't really have to explain last time I checked" Elena smiled. Dare looked at her with annoyance, then a small smile crept on her face.

"You're right. Wow it's weird seeing you as a Colonel now. Hell, I had to issue you orders when you were a Lieutenant. You're on equal footing to me now. Maybe you can help get these knuckle heads in line" Veronica said smiling.

"I've got my own wing to handle Veronica; don't be pushing your own problems on me. By the way, congratulations on the position for the newly christened \_Conundrum\_. She'll be in good hands" Elena said.

"Thanks. And congratulations on you being a Colonel now. I'll actually have someone to talk to that actually knows what I'm saying" she said, and looked at Buck.

"Hey, subtle hints do not work! Obvious hints do not work! Just tell us what you want! We guys will do it, just tell us what you want!" he said annoyed.

"Where would the fun be in that?" Elena replied and smirked. Veronica chuckled and Buck gave up.

"Ma'am? I have a package here for you" a marine corporal walked up behind all of them.

"Don't look at me, I didn't order it" Buck said as Veronica looked at it.

"That's not what I want to hear Eddy!" Veronica growled at him.

"It's for the Colonel ma'am" the corporal said and handed her the package. She ripped the wrapping off the outside of it. Inside was a gold dipped rose, sitting next to another red rose. The rose was fresh, and still had water on it.

"It was delivered ten minutes ago ma'am" the corporal told her.

"Thank you" she said and he saluted and walked away. Elena sniffed the rose and picked up the card.

To my soul mate,

I hope you are having a great Thanksgiving. I am always thinking of you. Come back to me soon.

Your Beloved,

Andy

"Oh, a secret admirer huh?" Renee asked.

"No, actually, it's my fiancÃ©. He sent me them it looks like. How sweet" she replied and sniffed the rose again.

"Why don't you do that?" Veronica asked and nudged Buck.

"Because every time I've done it you threw the roses away in the trash" he grumbled.

"Because you are usually sending them to apologize for something that you shouldn't have done!" she retorted.

"In which I didn't even know I had done something wrong!" he snapped.

"Alright you two, you can go to his quarters, we don't need to see the make-up sex out here in the hallway" Elena quipped. Both of them looked at her with their mouths open and then looked at each other. They shut up immediately.

"Wow, you're as bad as my best friend Amy" Renee remarked, sizing Elena up.

"Her and my friend Amber would get along just fine then. I think part of her sense of humor has rubbed off on me" Elena told her.

"Well, it's getting late; we should all get some sleep. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow" Veronica told them and they all nodded. They said their goodbyes and Elena walked down a hallway towards her quarters, the Master Chief following.

"Ah, we stay in the same section" she said. He nodded in acknowledgement, and just as he opened his door and she opened her own, Dr. Wright walked up to her from down another hallway.

"Elena!" he said, bringing his hand up with his index finger raised, asking for a moment of her time.

"Daveth, I thought you'd still be talking with the Admirals" she said.

"I was. We found something, something no one is going to like. I need to show you something" he said. Elena glanced at John, who shrugged and entered his quarters. Apparently it was for higher ranks, and she fit the bill. She looked down at the data pad he showed her.

"An unknown beacon? Waitâ€¦ theâ€¦ it moved?" she read the report.

"It was sighted by a prowler at the edge of Sangheili space, and in all honesty, at the rim of our galaxy. It was unlike anything we've ever seen, and thenâ€¦ gone" he told her.

"Soâ€¦ it looks like some sort of fighter craftâ€¦ or transport maybe? I've never seen the design before" she said and activated her magnification lenses in her eyes. The craft, whatever it could be, was well armed.

"None of us have, and the Sangheili are saying the same. It isn't Covenant, and definitely not Jaralhanæ built. This may be someone elseâ€¦ someone far higher in the technology tier" he told her. She looked up at his face. He was worried.

"So, why am I being told about this?" she asked.

"You're the best chance of fighting it off if we ever go against it. We've been able to read through some history the forerunners left behind. What do you know about the forerunners might I ask?" he asked

her, just as she walked into her quarters and he followed.

"An advanced race, registered tier 1 technology level on their own scale, far more advanced than even the Covenant was. Technology exhumed from the Ark as well as parts retrieved from fallout of Truth's Dreadnaught are still being researched in their capability to help us rebuild" she chattered off then stopped.

"That's good. There's one other thing. Your fighter has partial forerunner and Covenant technology in its design" he told her. She stared at him, not blinking.

"Not surprising. The Long Sword fighters are sluggish crates compared to the Black Blade, I had a theory they were built around forerunner advancements" she said.

"And would you be surprised if I told you the Black Blade is not going to be the first incarnation of said technology?" he asked. She blinked.

"Isn't the UNSC Infinity built with forerunner technology?" she asked.

"Yes, and the Conundrum, but those are ships. Your fighter is similar to the Spartan's MJOLNIR. When newer incarnations are built, the old is replaced, to keep the Spartans at peak capability. You are no different. Your skills would be hampered if we kept you flying the same fighter when newer technologies become available" Dr. Wright said. He switched through another file.

"We did it. We condensed the Shaw-Fujikawa drive and it's being installed into your fighters as we speak. I just wanted to give you a heads up on what is happening Elena. Be prepared tomorrow" he said and patted her on the shoulder.

"Daveth, can I ask you something? Why was I told I'd become a Lieutenant Colonel, and then suddenly get a notch above?" she asked. Daveth gazed at her.

"It's mainly because a Lieutenant Colonel can still be given orders by a Captain my dear. This way, you can have your wing go where you need it to. You'll be given orders from Generals and Admirals, but below that is not your problem. We're trying to keep you from doing what will hinder you. Trust me, it was for the best and it doesn't change much does it?" he told her.

"No, I guess not. Why am I picking out pilots though? We only have four other fighters, it's not like I can issue them all one, and the squadron is supposed to have eighteen pilots. I have four, five if you include me, and I'm still looking at the others for review. There's no way I'm going to have this finished by tomorrow" she said.

Daveth sat down next to her on her bed. "Hmmm, have you considered having a Lieutenant Colonel be transferred under you so he or she could manage the transfers? You are nitpicking at the roster my dear" he chuckled.

"But I am â€¦ never mind" she was going to say she was a Lieutenant Colonel, but it had already changed.

"Here, look at this. A Lieutenant Colonel Sahji Patel. He's highly recommended. See? Someone under you that can give orders while you do the flying. Then there are two Majors, a Major Luke Grissom and a Major Arthur Dagerstone. They should be able to help you with everything you need to keep the wing at optimal readiness. You need to simply balance the duties between them, and then provide orders when needed when they need you to respond. As I've said before and I'll say it again, you worry too much my dear" Daveth pointed at her slightly and then got up from the bed. She nodded and accepted the transfers for the names he pointed out, and then sighed.

"Does it ever get easier?" she asked.

"Sadly my dear, it only gets harder. But you should be able to handle that. You always do. Think of it as a challenge" he said as he beamed at her. He then left without another word. She laid down on her bed and ran her fingers through her hair. It was going to be a long day tomorrow.

## 12. War Drums and Funerals

\*\*[1200 hours, November 25\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System, Florida Base]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Vitaliy Zavadskyy â€" Long Time]\*\*

Renee was in awe. The amount of troops getting ready was massive. She had heard rumors through the last few days that huge armies of personnel were getting ready to head out, but she never knew it was this large. One million marines and just around two hundred and fifty thousand ODSs were prepped and heading skyward, along with just over seventy five thousand Long Sword fighter pilots and other craft. Fifteen thousand tanks and warthogs were being moved, and the fleet was preparing to head out, the new fleet. She had never known there were this many UNSC forces still surviving on Earth, and yet there were still probably more guarding the home world.

The sky looked like a hornet's nest, as hundreds of pelicans rose into the air from all over the world, heading to their ships. Renee had just recently been issued her upgraded armor, though it didn't look very different, a few more panels of armor plating here and there and a slightly upgraded helmet, and it felt lighter and more comfortable, though she still felt the backpack carrying fifty pounds of combat equipment. Her MA5C was hanging from her shoulder on its strap as her squad followed. She walked towards the pelican she was assigned to and got a firsthand view of Elena's fighter squadron shoot right over them, heading towards the Conundrum. There were only four craft, which could mean Elena was still ground side or already on board.

"Nervous?" John said suddenly from behind her. She flipped around and saw John in his MJOLNIR Mk VII armor, with Fred and Kelly right behind him.

"A little. Is this really right? To help them I mean" she asked.

"We go where we're told remember? Don't worry, I'll be right with you" he said. She smiled a bit and looked back at the mass of



pelicans flying away.

"This is the biggest mobilization of troops I've ever seen" she whispered.

"Same. We should get moving to our pelican. I'll see you on the \_Conundrum\_" he told her.

"Wait, I'm assigned to it too?" she asked.

"Didn't you read the roster list Sergeant?" Kelly asked. Renee had forgotten. She just knew she was getting on board pelican Whiskey 4-4-3 and heading up. Everything had been a blur for her. She still saw columns of other marines filing into pelicans nearby, and even some Vulture gunships slowly taking off. She could barely see some ODSs getting into a pelican in the distance, and wondered if one of them was Buck or the rest of his team.

"There's the Colonel. We shouldn't keep her waiting, she's our escort up" John told her and she turned and saw Elena sitting in her cockpit, fully suited and watching everything. Renee waved and Elena did a two finger lazy salute to her temple at her. She then continued watching the loading commence. Renee ordered her squad onto the pelican and strapped in. the RORO closed slowly as it lifted off, the last thing she saw was Elena's fighter recognize her pelican lifting and the cockpit sealed. She took off quickly afterwards and followed.

\*\*[One hour later]\*\*

Renee exited the pelican to one hell of a view. She could see through a force field that now allowed continuous entrance into the hangar bays, before the doors would close for slip space. She could see at least fifty ships floating out in space, all of them brand new or remodeled.

"Sergeant Ma'am, where do we go?" one of her subordinates asked.

"Um" drop your gear off at the armory and head to your quarters for slip space entry. Afterwards there's free reign" she said quickly, still staring outside. Most of the ships she saw were brand new, with significantly upgraded equipment. Some of the cruisers looked like they didn't have MAC systems anymore running down their spine, but some new energy beam she didn't know about. She could see the energy rails running along the outside of some of the closer ones.

She decided to walk out of the hangar and drop her own gear off. Just as she left the hangar and headed down the hall, she saw Elena walking out of another hangar further down, talking to a Major under her command.

"Elena!" Renee waved to her. An ordinary person shouldn't have been able to hear her, but Elena's hearing was anything but normal now. She turned her head and looked down the hallway, and saw the female marine wave to her. She did a quick wave, then turned around and headed down the opposite hallway, with the Major in tow still talking to her about something, more than likely about her wing and orders. Renee decided it was best to get settled in and meet up with friends on board if she could find them. She already knew John was with her,

and all the other Spartans were on board. She hoped Buck's team was stationed here as well. All she had to do was wait.

\*\*[2000 hours, November 25\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Sol System]\*\*

It was amazing it only took eight hours to finish getting everyone on board the starships and ready for slip space. There were a few ships left for defense, and the MAC platforms were still being manned for orbital protection. Seventy five ships, with fifty percent of them being frigates, another thirty percent being cruisers, and the last twenty percent were carriers or supply craft. They'd need everything they could use brought with them, and a supply line was already thought up for other materials. The Sangheili had agreed to provide shelter and edible food for the humans when they arrived at whatever colonies they were helping defend, so that provided some relief, but they couldn't rely on the elite's assistance forever.

The brutes were still a vicious race, but they had found new intel that one chieftain has united all their clans in a temporary truce, simply to work together to annihilate the Elites from the galaxy, and the humans along with them. Elena was privy to one recording sent to them, as only the higher ranks were allowed to see it. The recording was blood curdling and made most of the Admirals and Generals look away from the screen and the Chieftain sent them a message, and had one human woman as a prisoner. He had raped her, beaten her, and during the recording picked her up and with a scream of unbelievable pain coming from her, ripped her arms off and then grabbed her legs and tore them off as well, with other brutes grabbing them and starting to chew on them. Other brutes came into the scene and started to rip out her organs while she was still alive and sobbing. Elena was the only one who seemed to be able to watch the whole thing besides Lord Admiral Hood.

Elena sat in a fairly comfortable chair in an observation room, a new feature in the advanced ship models. She could see outside the window as they shot through slip space, the window automatically tinting to protect the eyesight of anyone from the bright lights and odd changes in colors. Everyone was expecting some form of groan from some panel somewhere in the ship as other ships before usually did, reminding everyone that the ship was forcing its way through the slip space dimensions. The only thing that had let anyone know they were in slip space on the Conundrum, however, was a slight vibration throughout the ship and then nothing, aside from looking out a window. All of the new ships sported a shielding system now, though it wasn't quite as strong as a Covenant ship's shield system, it still protected against ample damage. The ships supplemented with stronger armor however.

The trip for the whole fleet would take one solid month, and with their improved slip space navigation and upgraded slip space drives, it was accurate. They needed to hop between two different planets before they were inside Sangheili space, then they would be met by Sangheili "Holy" forces. They would join together and head to one colony that has shown significant rebel activity, and eliminate them with extreme prejudice. They would then move to one more colony, and finally to Sangheilios. Once they had secured the Elite home world, they would broadcast the control of the world to all colonies, in hopes of discouraging the rebels and stopping the rebellion. Afterwards, they would turn their attention to the brutes and defend

against their incursions and invade their sector of space.

Elena chuckled as she read an amusing passage in a data book she had laying on her lap. Almost no one else seemed to enjoy the quiet the observation room provided, and she liked that. She was able to get some peace and quiet even if it was without other people around her, and read her books. It was one of the few times she could relax now.

Elena saw the door open and Sarah walked in. She didn't notice Elena sitting in the chair near the window and simply walked over to a shelf to grab a data book, then turned around to sit in another chair. She immediately jumped and was startled when she saw Elena sitting there.

"Iâ€| whoaâ€| youâ€| I'm sorryâ€| I didn't know that anyone else was hereâ€|" she said softly.

"It's just me. I'm just reading a book. There are plenty of chairs Sarah. C'mon, sit down" Elena told her and gave her a warm smile. Sarah looked at the chair opposite of Elena and then back at her commander. She took a deep breath and nodded, and then walked over and sat across from her.

"Umâ€| thank you" Sarah said timidly. Elena nodded to her. "I don't control this room Sarah, you're free to come and go as you please. Don't worry, I don't bite" she told the blonde woman and smiled. Sarah's mouth broke into a small smile and picked up her book.

"Whatâ€| umâ€| what are you reading might I ask?... orâ€| wellâ€| you don't have to tell me if you don't want toâ€|" Sarah asked her.

"You may ask. It's called "Time Keeper" and I've so far found it very interesting. What are you reading?" she asked her.

"Umâ€| it's called "The Fallen Knight's Daughter." I've read it when I was a childâ€|" Sarah softly said, almost seeming excited when she was asked what the book was.

"Oh? Is it your favorite?" Elena asked.

"Umâ€| yesâ€| I like how the ending plays outâ€|" she said, and a small giggle escaped her mouth.

"Sorryâ€|" she felt embarrassed and looked away.

"For what? If it makes you feel like that, then it must be a really good read. There are very few stories that can make someone giggle or feel happy about something, and just the same amount that can frighten or make a person feel angry. A testament to the author I would say" Elena told her.

"Iâ€| I never thought about thatâ€|" she said.

"Colonel! Are you in there?" they both heard.

"Oh hellâ€| and here I thought I had escaped the menagerie that was my job" Elena growled. Sarah giggled a tiny bit as Elena smirked at her and winked, then got up and walked to the door just as Buck

opened it.

"Ah, so you are on board! We saw the fighters in the hangars and hoped you were here. It took a lot of searching to find you. Living up to your name I guess. Hey, we got the entertainment room all set up, wanna have a go? It's been ten years, how about a little fun eh?" he said, putting his fists in mock boxing.

"I'm not a kid anymore Eddy. I'll come and watch if it'll make you guys happy though" she chuckled.

"Ah come on. It's no fun if you don't play. You always make it interesting" he told her.

"I've grown up and have a reputation and a rank now. That doesn't make it fun for anyone who has to play against me" she retorted.

"Oh ho! You think you can win against everyone in those games dontcha?" he cocked an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I've beaten everyone in the past. I'm not saying I'll beat anyone in the boxing games, but in the flight Sims or the racing games I tend to win. Simple fact. I'm at least average in the first person shooters, I wouldn't toot my horn for those" she replied.

"Well, I guess we'd have to find a pilot who could match your skills" Buck said as he rubbed an invisible goatee on his chin.

"Eddy, I've been looking for those for the past week. If you find one, I'd be a very happy Colonel."

"Maybe one of your-" Buck watched her face as she cocked her eyebrow. She knew he was going to say one of her pilots could match her, the ones she has been working hard to have cooperate with each other. So far, they had been doing well in the training she had them go through to get a grasp of how each flew. Sarah was quick and agile, capable of dodging a surprising amount of locks and paint rounds. Merricks seemed to enjoy the heavier equipment he could have on his fighter, and kept begging her to allow him to get the new particle cannons installed over his wings for heavy support. Elena kept declining as it slowed him down and those were for specialty missions only, but it didn't faze him.

Jacobs was downright scared of Elena. She intimidated him just by entering a room, which she didn't mean to. She did want him to fix his egotistical remarks, which he was breaking his habit of due to his worry she'd appear out of nowhere behind him and hear anything he had said, which she tended to do while moving between different sections of the ship. He was always the first one to salute her when she showed up, and always doing his best to make himself look good in front of her. She finally had to tell him his sparkly uniform and spit shined shoes didn't mean a damned thing to her, as long as he followed her orders, watched out for his squad mates like they were his family, and flew well.

Roberts was a bit of an enigma to her. She didn't really need to tell him to do anything. He simply knew what she wanted from the get go and was already doing what she was going to order him to do. She liked that very much, as it gave her time to keep an eye on Sarah and

see how she responded. Sarah was very withdrawn from everyone else, and kept to herself often. She always seemed afraid of others being angry at her, so she thought through each word carefully as it left her mouth. Elena was constantly trying to bring her confidence up, but most of her efforts failed as Sarah didn't seem to get the inspiring quotes she used or the feel of performing a maneuver that Elena taught her that would even impress the other pilots.

Her direct subordinates she never had to give orders. They were selected to help Elena govern her wing so she could keep her head stuck on flying. She was the whole fleet's ace in the hole when it came down to fighter combat or even taking on another ship. She was a mini cruiser, capable of taking on ships far larger than her and still be capable of winning.

"Never mind, scratch that. Forget I said anything" Buck chuckled.

"I was about to say, not one of my pilots Eddy. I've barely got their heads into a cohesive fighting force now. I don't expect them to be like me, but I expect them to at least work together. Doesn't your ODS team work well?" she asked.

"Are you kidding me missy? Don't get me wrong, they're good at their jobs, but the little quirks sometimes make me want to whack em one you know?" Buck told her.

"I hear ya" Elena chuckled.

"Sometimes, and please don't let anyone else know this cause I swear I'll deny it, I wish Renee was an ODS" he whispered to her.

"She doesn't seem afraid of anything, or if she is, she stuffs it down quick and soldiers up like the rest of us. I saw her marks for the range. You never know Eddy, she could be a marksman on your team if you offered" she told him.

"Yeah butâ€¦ eh, I think I'd be strangled to death by that hulk of muscle she loves before I see her first jump you know?" he said in mock fear.

"He's not as bad as you think he is Eddy. Remember that day?" she asked.

"How could I forgetâ€¦ I still feel sorry for you Elena. If he wasn't there, I don't know what that bastard would have done to you, and I don't wanna know. Iâ€¦ saw the return pilot roster when they evacuated that sectorâ€¦ he was listed as KIAâ€¦" he told her softly.

"Yeahâ€¦ I was told that by my fatherâ€¦ you know I hated his guts, butâ€¦ I didn't wish for him to be killed you know? And Jonesâ€¦" she replied, her eyes cast down at the ground, and she fidgeted with her left foot.

"What about him? He wasn't listed KIA" Buck told her. She looked up at him immediately.

"What?" she gawked.

"Didn't you know? He was one of the main fighter pilots during the

Battle of Earth. Hell, didn't you say you wanted another pilot in your wing? See if he'll transfer. I'm sure he's on one of those ships out there." Elena was in shock. Her old friend was alive. Would he remember her? Was he the same or had ten years changed him?

"But he's Navy Eddy, I wouldn't know where to begin" she told him.

"Check with Veronica then, she might know. Couldn't hurt" he said and shrugged.

"Yeah, your right. Thanks Eddy" she said and he gave her a thumbs up.

"I told you I'd look out for you back then. I meant it. This is part of looking out for you" he told her smiling.

"I can look out for myself these days, but thanks regardless. Now it looks like I'll be looking out for you guys in the future" she smirked.

"And I'll be loving every moment of you tearing things apart above us while we sling some lead at those overgrown monkeys. The old team will be together again. I even heard Farrah is in charge of the pelicans on the \_Infinity\_."

Elena looked down at the floor again.

"Almost the whole teamâ€¦" she whispered.

"Sorryâ€¦ heyâ€¦ I uhâ€¦ I heard through the grape vine we'll be stopping at the planet your father wasâ€¦ you knowâ€¦" he told her.

"I know. I'm gonna be allowed to go out quickly and survey the debris. Once I come back, and everyone has had a chance to settle down, we'll head back into slip space. I have to see him Buck. I have to bring his body back, or at least his pelican. It's the right thing to do" she said looking up into his eyes, a sense of confidence showing in them.

"He'd be so proud of you right now" Buck told her with a huge grin on his face.

"I hope he is. I've made Colonel, have my own wing under my command, and I made it as a pilot. I reached my goal. Can we uhâ€¦ can we stop talking about this please?... I uhâ€¦ I think we should just start heading to the entertainment roomâ€¦" she said as she turned around and looked at Sarah in the observation room.

"Hey, you wanna come sit with us Sarah? You're invited" Elena asked her quickly, trying to keep her voice from cracking.

"Umâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I don't want to intrudeâ€¦" she responded, a noticeable turtle scrunch showing as she dipped her head a bit.

"I'm inviting you, and you aren't intruding. If anyone says otherwise, they answer to me and Buck, right Eddy?" she asked and turned around to look at him. A fire was in her eyes as she tried to forget the fateful day of her father's death.

"Right, you just hang with us kiddo, no worries" he nodded to her.

"Alrightâ€¦ I'll come" she said and put her book back into the shelf she got it from, and then followed them both to the entertainment room. She kept looking up at Elena who was almost a head taller than her then looking away. Elena could see her blushing when she looked at her and thought she wasn't seen doing it. Elena was quick to see her looks though. She wondered what was up with them.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

"I'm telling you, the screams and moaning coming from his room were so loud, I couldn't believe it" Jacobs said as he was talking to Mickey.

"Sheesh, you'd think she'd get something to bite or something, maybe use the pillow" Mickey said trying to stifle a giggle.

"I swear; my quarters are right next to his and all I heard the last hour was thumping against the wall! I know we don't have that much to do during the slip space travel but it's shorter now than before and there's an entertainment room and an observation room and there's a new pool in the gym you can swim in! And the first thing that comes to mind for those two is-" Jacobs was about to finish when the door opened.

"Oh shit! Run before round three starts!" Jacobs and Mickey ran as Renee poked her head out the door and watched them run.

"Uh ohâ€¦" she mumbled as John poked his head out too.

"We might want to keep it down" John told her.

"I didn't think we were that loud, were we?" she asked.

"Me? No. You?..." he didn't finish. She tilted her head and glared at him.

"I didn't make any noise" he told her again.

"Oh? What was with all the "oh Renee, oh Renee" stuff then? Practicing asking me questions or thinking of orders?" she said with a smirk creeping onto her face.

"I never said that. You're putting words in my mouth" he said, and did his best to put his mask of stone on. He was sadly failing with a slight twitch on his lip.

"I know that twitch. You know exactly what you said you are horrible at lying with that twitch. We're going to have to be more carefulâ€¦" she said.

"Or ask for sound proof insulation" he remarked. Both of them saw Ezekiel down the hallway as he turned the corner.

"Hey, who was the screamin banshee I heard a few minutes ago? I could hear her clear over the sector for bloody sakes!" he

grumbled.

"Don't know sir, we'll ask her to keep it down if we see her" John told him.

"You do that Master Chief. I'm going to see if I can catch some shut eye now that she's shut her gob for a few" he said and turned back around to head back the way he came.

"We should probably go find some entertainment to keep us busy" Renee said. John looked at her. "Your mind is in the gutter John. I never expected a Spartan to do that. I mean another form of entertainment. Amy has rubbed off on you" she backhanded his chest playfully, the back of her hand hitting stone hard muscle.

"My mind is capable of many things, but nothing can come close to Amy's comments" he said and turned around to go get dressed. She followed and the door closed.

\*\*[Forty minutes later]\*\*

Elena sat down on a leather chair watching the start of a poker game. Merricks, Buck, Dutch and Roberts were playing. Renee and John walked into the room and waved to everyone.

"Hey guys" Renee said and everyone acknowledged them.

"Hey, come over here" Elena motioned for her to come over. Sarah was busy watching the poker game with interest.

"Get something to bite on, as I know for a fact it's you" Elena whispered to her. Renee looked astonished.

"I don't know-" she tried to say.

"I have vocal recognition in my neural lace Ren. I use it to track my pilots. I can also see through walls when I'm trying to find something" she told her. Renee broke into a smile for a second then suddenly frowned, and a small laugh burst out, then she looked serious.

"You can't really see through walls can you?" she whispered. Elena nodded and did just that. Renee could barely see a small reaction hidden inside her eyes. It was barely noticeable, but it proved what she could do.

"Oh my-" her mouth fell open.

"Ah ah ah, I didn't see much, I just wanted to know where the sound was coming from. Just a friendly word of caution is all I'm offering that's all. Oh, and tell John to quiet down tooâ€¦" she chuckled. Renee did her best to stifle a laugh, and John looked very uncomfortable as he had heard what she said. Elena looked up at him looming and mouthed "oh Renee, oh Renee" and smiled. He didn't know what to say.

"Alright, who wants to cut the cards?" Buck asked.

"Hey David, how about doing it for us?" Dutch asked. Roberts shrugged and picked up the deck. What happened next was nothing short of



amazing. He cut the deck and flipped a few cards around in his fingers like a game, doing little tricks here and there. He flipped four cards over his hand as he picked up another stack and the four cards slid effortlessly into the deck. Everyone was staring and watching him.

"Holyâ€¦ this isn't good" Buck gawked. Roberts threw a few cards into the air, catching them with half of the deck, the cards sliding easily into it as he dealt out the cards. He split the deck into sections, each carried in between his fingers as he rotated them around and put them back together in a different position.

"I've got a funny feeling we're about to get servedâ€¦" Dutch told the other two.

"Whatever gave you that idea" Merricks said as he watch how fast Roberts moved.

"Well that was certainly entertaining" Elena smirked and Roberts looked her in the eyes for a few seconds before getting back to the game. John looked between the two and could almost see the spark that flew from Roberts eyes to Elena's. If she received it, he wasn't sure.

The others got bored quickly after seeing the beginning of the poker game and decided to put on a movie. Eventually the poker game died off and they joined in watching it, with others coming in and taking seats. Once the movie was over, everyone decided it was time to go eat.

"You're gonna eat with us right Elena?" Dutch asked.

"I can't sadly. I gotta go talk to Veronica about our arrival to Skopje. I need to know how long we're staying" she said.

"We're just stopping there right?" Dutch asked.

"Well, yeah, butâ€¦ wellâ€¦" Elena couldn't find the words.

"Well what? Skopje is glassed right? Nothing to see really" Dutch said nonchalantly.

"Hey, what interest she has in that colony is her own business Dutch, so don't pry" Buck snapped.

"Didâ€¦ did something happen there? I mean I didn't mean toâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I'm sorryâ€¦" Sarah asked. Elena sighed as everyone was around her heading to the DFAC.

"For everyone's info, I'm heading out to oversee the reclamation of a pelican by the call sign Echo 2-1-2â€¦ it was my father's" she said softly. Everyone was silent after that. Most of them knew what happened at Skopje, how their ships had ran and didn't have a chance to retrieve any escape pods or perform rescue operations on the damaged frigates, and how Skopje was abandoned and later glassed.

Sarah looked as if she had done something terrible, and Roberts walked up to her.

"Hey, it's ok, you didn't know" he told her.

"Iâ€¦ I didn't mean toâ€¦ I justâ€¦ it must have been terribleâ€¦" she said. They entered the DFAC and got their food as Elena continued on to the lift to head up, then found a table in the back. Jacobs saw Elena walk by the door and immediately scarfed his food and picked up his tray in record time, then dropped off the tray and walked out.

Everyone started up conversations, but Sarah remained largely out of everything, answering quickly before staring off into space.

"Hey, are you ok?" Renee asked.

"Ohâ€¦ I'm alrightâ€¦ thank youâ€¦" she said and got up with her tray. Everyone wished her a good night and she walked back to a lift and headed to deck nine. Elena talked to Veronica on the bridge involving their arrival and the request for a tug to follow her out to find the pelican. She then walked out and down the hall, guards saluting her along the way. She made it to her quarters and entered, and then opened her locker. Inside, laying on the top shelf, was the broken pelican. It was the size of her hand, and its paint seemed to be well worn, but it still was holding together aside from the wing sitting next to it. She stood there for what seemed like hours staring at it, which turned out to only be a few minutes.

She walked over and sat on her bed, and looked at the picture she brought with her in a frame on the nightstand.

She closed her eyes for a few seconds, the memory of her sitting with her father for the group picture showing in her mind.

"\_Hey statue! Crack a smile for the lady would ya! We're running out of time here!"\_

"\_Atta boy! Okay, it's on a timer!"\_

"\_Hate to break it to everybody, but it's time to fly!"\_

She opened her eyes and they went straight to her father's face. Tears welled up in her eyes and she lay down on her bed and cried herself to sleep.

\*\*[0900 hours, November 28\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)  
Orbiting Skopje]\*\*

Elena was suited up and in her cockpit immediately. She was the only one besides a tug crew who were going outside. Everyone was silent when she walked from her quarters to the armory for her suit, then to her fighter. Everyone knew not to say a word to her. She had permission to leave by Captain Dare, and she was just waiting for the outside doors to open before she JTOL'd upwards and zipped outside, heading straight towards a debris cloud. Everyone was in a very solemn mood that day. They could all see the floating wreckage of the ships that were destroyed above, the fighters blown apart and the lives lost. They were near a heroes graveyard, and no one wanted to stay there for long, lest they feel unworthy.

Elena shot past a hulking remains of a frigate's right engine pod, then flew up and towards a piece of plating, swerving around it and

checking her sensors constantly. He had to be out there.

Her diligence served her well. She picked up a ping that looked similar to a pelican, and slowly came upon it. Floating in space, a silent tomb, was Echo 2-1-2. It was missing the rear right half of its gimbal and cargo hold, whether it was melted or blown off she didn't know, and the RORO was floating nearby. Armor shards were orbiting it somehow, and the pelican slowly rotated like a clock.

Elena felt her heart jump in her throat. She couldn't cry; she didn't want her vision to blur.

"Hey dadâ€¦ I'm hereâ€¦ I made itâ€¦" she whispered. She made sure her suit's seals were coupled correctly and then activated depressurization suction to pull in all the oxygen around her into temporary canisters in the cockpit, then she unlocked the cockpit after making sure the fighter was in a stable position. She slipped softly out of the cockpit and pushed off from the fighter towards the pelican, the tug sitting nearby patiently. Elena grabbed hold of the left aft gimbal and rotated herself, slinging her body right into the cargo hold. She clamped her feet down on the floor and magnetized her boots, then walked slowly to the cockpit door. She knew there was no power left after so many years, so she pried off the door button console and pumped the lever to manually open the door. The hatch slowly pushed away, and she slid herself through it and into the cockpit.

She stared at the pilot's seat from behind, and saw a small pill float by.

"\_I'd rather not have the windshield covered in half-digested Wheaties please"\_

Elena smiled under her helmet. She missed him greatly.

"I made it through the academy dadâ€¦ I did what I said. I'm a pilot now. You don't have to worry about me anymore. I'm alright" she was almost crying now in her helmet, but she fought back the tears as she came up to sit in the co-pilot's seat. She softly sat down and looked over. There, sitting in the pilot's seat, was a body. It had plasma burns on the flight suit and holes in the chest, the helmeted head slumped somewhat to the right with no gravity. It was strapped in to the seat so it couldn't float away.

"I love you dad" she said as she stared at the body. She almost couldn't take it, the tears were welled up in her eyes and blurring her vision. She now had proof. She was staring at proof her father was dead.

The tug came to the front of the pelican and two techs floated out, each with an unlatching tool that they used on the cockpit's windshield. They pried the windows off, and saw her sitting there.

"Ma'am, are you ok with us taking the body out and attaching to the craft?" one of them asked softly.

"Yes. I'm alright with it. It's not him anymore. It's just a body" she said.

"If there's anything in the black box meant for you, we'll have it sent to your quarters Colonel" the tech said. She nodded and sniffled once, then got up as they moved in and unstrapped the body, then carried it to the tug. She slipped out the same way she came, and got inside her fighter. She took a long look at Echo 2-1-2 as they carried it into hangar nine, and dropped it on the ground. She knew every inch of that pelican, every noise it made, and every dent before its death. She broke off from staring and flew towards her own hangar, landing and getting out. She took her helmet off and walked towards the armory. Ezekiel grabbed her arm softly before she could leave.

"Hey, are you alright?" he asked.

"Thank you butâ€¦ I think I need some time aloneâ€¦" she said and he nodded. She walked to the armory quickly, got changed, and then walked towards her quarters. Renee and John were talking nearby as they saw her, and they both nodded to her, knowing how she was feeling. She got to the lift, went to deck two, and then went straight to her room. She couldn't believe it. He was dead. All that time she still had hope, some idea that he pulled a miracle from nowhere and had landed on a non-glassed spot of Skopje, or was rescued somehow or was at least captured and was a prisoner of war. It wasn't. He was on an autopsy table in the medical bay. Cause of death: Plasma. No, that was bullshit. Cause of death was cowardess. They attacked a defenseless transport and her father paid the price for their screwed up view of honor.

She heard her terminal beep, telling her she had a message. She looked at it and sniffled. She walked over to it and turned it on.

Colonel Gripen,

We'll start on the autopsy now. We'll send anything of importance to you.

Medical Bay

Elena didn't care. She was done. She wanted to leave now. She did what she had to do and now they were going to head to another planet for their final slip space gate out towards Sangheili space. She was ready for the war. She wanted them to see what her people went through. She wanted revenge and she was definitely going to be out for blood when they got there.

She received another message from the hangar.

"Thought you'd want to hear this Elena. Your father recorded it before heâ€¦ well, it's for you" Ezekiel said over the coms. She opened her terminal for the transfer, and the recording popped up. It requested her personal iris scan and thumb print. She did both checks and the recording started.

"Elena, this isâ€¦ this is obviously your father speaking, wow that sounds so stupid. Of course you know it's me. You knew who I was ever since you were born, staring at me with your big blue eyes. I wanted to say I miss you, and I know you're scared for me. There are two pelicans that are under attack and I need to help them. I got ordered

back to the ship but those guys aren't gonna survive unless someone steps in. I know your probably angry" Elena started to cry, bringing her hand up to her forehead and closing her eyes "and I know you don't want this to happen, or didn't want this to happen. I don't want it to happen either. I want to go home to you, and see you one last time." She could hear his voice cracking as he was most definitely crying "I want to see you reach your dream. I wish I could live to see that. But these guys, they have family too. There are a lot of them in there, and if I don't help them, there's going to be a lot of daughters who won't see their fathers again. I'm so sorry. I know you'll make it alright without me, you're strong and smart and you make friends so fast. Everyone else will look out for you. Take care Elena. I love you so much. I'll always be with you, right in your heart whenever you need me."

Elena was sobbing as sounds of explosions could be heard and plasma fire struck the pelican. Jack screamed as there was a sound of depressurization in the cockpit as air escaped the holes in the windshield. The recording ended.

"Dadâ€¦| noâ€¦|" she cried out and continued to sob. She stayed in her quarters the rest of the day. It was like reliving that hell all over again for her, when she found out her father was killed.

\*\*[Ten hours later]\*\*

"No one has seen her walk out" Ezekiel told the group. Buck sat silent in the mess hall with Renee and John.

"Shit this must be a nightmare for her. This whole time she's been clinging to hope that he was somehow alive, and nowâ€¦| there it isâ€¦| he's deadâ€¦|" Buck softly said.

"There were other recordings found but all of them seem garbled or static, most likely previous dates of transporting supplies" Ezekiel told them.

"Poor Elenaâ€¦|" Renee said.

"The war took a lot of lives" John said. Renee looked up at him.

"How can you say that? Yeah it took a lot of lives, it took her father from her John. She has a right to be grieving" she sternly said to him.

"And the families of the rest of those men who died here have rights to grieve as well. But they're civilians. She isn't. Look, I'm not saying she doesn't get to grieve for her father, but there will be more lives lost by the end of this next war Renee. We may lose our lives. Some of us won't come back. She should understand this and act as her rank should show. We need to keep our heads ready for what's coming. She can grieve for her loss later once she's home" he said.

"Are you serious? You can't be. I can't believe I'm hearing this from you John. What if it was me? Would you grieve or would you soldier on?" she said and stood up and walked out of the mess hall. John reached out towards her, trying to figure out the words to apologize, but they wouldn't come out of his mouth. He slammed his fist into the

table, denting it. Buck and Ezekiel looked at the table wide eyed, and then up at him. They both had the same decision float through their heads on whether to run like hell or sit there, depending on if the Spartan was angry enough. He softened quickly.

"Of course I'd grieveâ€|" he whispered and got up, then walked out of the mess as well.

"Well this day just went to the shitterâ€|" Ezekiel said and got up, dumped his trash in the trash can then walked off. Buck just sat there thinking.

\*\*[Ten minutes later]\*\*

Renee was walking towards the lift to try and get to deck two in hopes of comforting Elena in some form. She didn't know how, or what she'd do to help, but she had to try something, especially with John's words running through her head. He above everyone should have understood the need to grieve. He nearly lost her all those years ago.

"Sergeant Kilburn?" she heard a voice behind her just as she left the lift on deck two.

"Yes?" she answered and turned around. A marine was standing behind her with a data pad.

"I'm Gunnery Sergeant Turkins. There's been a slight problem with one of your squad members. He had apparently some unknown pain in his abdomen and he's since found out he has to go through surgery. He'll be out of commission for a bit, which is why I'm here" he said.

She looked confused. "So my squad is one down sir?" she asked.

"No. Actually, he's being replaced. There is a corporal who will be taking his place as a permanent position. Corporal Milo Gripen."

(Author's Note: So yeah, this chapter just sort of possessed me and I figured it would give a good view of what her father meant to her. I noticed this chapter is a severe and somber contrast to the previous chapter. I guess I wanted everyone to see what Elena has to go through. She isn't all bad ass and leet skillz, she's got baggage just like everyone else. )

### 13. Crouching Fighter, Hidden Alien

(Author's Note: I got a PM asking me why it is exactly I place a notice in bold of Music: something something before things happen in a chapter. That's a very good question. The song that I believe is playing during that scene is why I put it there. Just as most movies have background music telling you just how epic or scary something should be, this is also why I put the name of the song there, so readers can get an idea of just what is happening. Almost all the songs you can listen to demos of on iTunes or download freely in some form. I highly recommend you, the readers, get the songs or at least listen to the demos to get an idea of just what is going on during some of the scenes. For all intents and purposes, a story is a movie in your mind, and there should be scenes in which you know just how

freaky something is or how awesome it is.)

\*\*[0800 hours, December 5\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Shaquille Colony]\*\*

Everyone was packed. The pelicans were ready to go, all fighters were prepped for combat, human and Sangheili. The fleet had dropped out of slip space for a final time and rendezvoused with the Arbiter's fleet. Elena was astonished. The Arbiter's fleet was quite small, only one hundred ships, and some weren't even fully repaired yet. There were dents and battle damage still seen on some of the ships, a testament to just how little the elites knew about their technology.

Elena was present during the meeting with the Arbiter, but she did not want to talk with him. She was ordered there by Hood himself, and she begrudgingly went. The Master Chief went with her, but Renee and the others were not to be invited. Spartans and high officials only.

The Arbiter had looked at her for a few seconds, and she narrowed her eyes. These were the people who killed her father. She hated them, and the elites knew that actually. They still respected her given the fact she had almost destroyed a battle cruiser with a fighter.

The Sangheili were peculiar in how they responded to humans. During the war they had considered humans as vermin, not worth the time to name even. Now, however, there were mixed views. The stalwart traditionalists were against humans being anywhere near them, but they tolerated them enough to not kill them. The newer view however, was of friendship. Humanity was coming to their aid despite the UNSC still being rebuilt, with very few resources. The Sangheili respected that, and were actually surprised to see the humans had built a new fleet, while their fleet had condensed using half of the rest of their ships for spare parts. The human fleet was smaller than the Arbiter's fleet, but not by much.

The UNSC fleet also had something the Arbiter's fleet barely had any of. A supply chain. Logistics. All wars were built on this. Without it, the UNSC fleet would have to go home every so often to regain repairs, supplies, new personnel, and the most valuable of all, mail.

Elena walked towards the hangar bay wearing her suit. She had calmed down quite a bit since she had evidence of her father's death. Renee had tried to comfort her, as did everyone else, and she did whatever she could to stay busy during the past few days. She personally told her direct subordinates to turn in all requests to her to provide something to do, and they did. Now that they were hovering over a Sangheili colony world however, she needed to get her head in the game.

Thel'Vadam, who all humans knew as the Arbiter, had accepted the offer of Terrence Hood to help repair their ships. Elena was a little annoyed with the fact there were still elites walking up and down the hallways, moving between different sections. Why they were allowed to stay on board was beyond her.

Elena went into the briefing room and sat down at a small desk seemingly made for students. Quite a few marines, ODSTs and pilots

were sitting with her. Roberts and Sarah were to her left while Merricks and Jacobs were sitting further down the row of desks. Renee and her squad were in the front row.

"Officer on deck!" someone yelled and Captain Dare walked into the room. Everyone stood up at attention except Elena. She was in the same pay grade as Veronica was.

"At ease and sit down. Alright ladies and gentlemen. We are currently near Shaquille, a Sangheili colony. I know some of you have misgivings about helping them, but whatever thoughts you have, stow them. You're here because the UNSC said you're here. Now, we are doing a crash beachhead strike today. Everyone, we are not fighting hinge heads, but rather Jiralhanae. They have been encroaching into Sangheili territory while their pants have been around their collective ankles, and it's gonna be our job to pull them back up and wipe their ass. Intel says artillery will be found down there, and some trench warfare. The Jiralhanae are stupid in everything but warfare people. Now, they have a small fleet right here" Veronica pointed to a holo screen as it showed icons of the space around the planet. The enemy blips didn't seem very numerous "and we need to go through it before we land troops. We will be launching all fighters and heading straight into the fray. Once the fleet is neutralized, we will then send down pelicans and ODSs to capture the encampments the brutes have built, and dismantle any anti air defenses they have" Veronica paused for a bit as she looked at everyone.

"Ma'am" one marine, a Lieutenant, spoke up.

"Yes Lieutenant Wicker?" she asked.

"The position of our LZ is near a mountainside. It looks like we'll be attacking the air defenses first, but there are artillery lines nearby that will probably be launching at us. Shouldn't we be neutralizing what can harm us on the ground first then turn to what's stopping our fliers?" he asked.

"Lieutenant, that's a very good question. The answer is no, you will take the air defenses down as quickly as possible as there are more of them than the artillery lines. Colonel Gripen's squadron as well as the 180th tactical Long Sword wing will be engaging in rampage strikes as well as helping with the anti-air. Once the AA is down, the fight will be much easier." Veronica continued to explain where everyone will be dropping or landing, which positions they will be taking and holding, and where vehicles will be dropped.

Nothing was said about how the fighters would be engaging in the battle, as Elena would be providing orders for them, and they had to be adaptive in their attacks to provide artillery assistance until a real artillery line was set up as well as dog fighting. Flying by the seat of their pants until the marines had the encampments under control.

"Briefing over. Dismissed" Veronica finished and everyone filed out. Veronica walked up to Elena as she watched her pilots walk out.

"Think this will be an easy fight?" she asked. Elena turned to her and blinked.



"We're fighting aging frigates and cruisers made by the covenant maybe a hundred years ago and aren't well maintained. If we don't blow them up, they'll do it for us eventually" Elena responded.

"I wonder if they gutted their ships to provide space for their troops. Would explain why we aren't picking up many transports in that fleet. Now that we have shields, their guns don't look so mean anymore" Veronica smiled.

"Hey Captain Dare, don't get cocky, remember what we thought about the Covenant the first time we met them? Took out almost three ships with one of theirs. We'll win, but we still have to mitigate casualties" Elena chuckled.

"I'm not being cocky, I just know the ship is capable of handling what we throw at them now. We don't have to be so worried about collisions and impacts from torpedoes. Makes me glad we're on board this thing versus the others. I actually feel sorry for the other crews; they're still inside the Marathon cruisers or Paris frigates. Hope we get some more advanced ships sent along the supply line" Veronica grumbled.

"Well, I gotta go get prepped. See ya when we get back" Elena said and Veronica nodded. Elena then walked out of the briefing room and towards her hangar.

She walked into the hangar bay and jogged to her fighter. She put her helmet on and slipped into her cockpit, then closed it up and did her preflight. She told the CIC she was ready to launch, and they slid her onto a magnetic rail and prepped her for launching out of the ship. She shot forward on the rail quickly, followed by the rest of her squadron.

"All Ravens, form up on me" she said as she headed towards what they all thought was an enemy fleet.

"All pilots, be advised. We are not picking up any IFF signals from the enemy fleet as of yet. No launch of fighters. They're-" Elena already could see it. The fleet, or what was left of it, was destroyed. There seemed to be thirty ships that were nothing but a debris field now. Everyone seemed shocked.

"What the hell? Some sort of in fighting between them?" Roberts asked.

"No idea, let the spooks investigate this, we're here to provide air cover down below. Whatever happened, it made our job easier" Elena told them.

"Raven 1-1, this is Admiral Hood. We require investigation into the debris field" she heard suddenly.

"What? Aren't we?" Merricks trailed off.

"Understood sir. Alright, Roberts and Reist, track sector one, Jacobs and Merricks you have sector two, I'll take the last layer" Elena told them. All of them winked their lights green on her HUD. They flew into the debris field, slowly moving through the scrap and the parts of the ships that were once Jiralhanae ships.

"Place is a spooky graveyard" Jacobs whispered as they scanned through the area.

"Something isn't right" Elena suddenly said.

"What do you mean?" Roberts asked.

"My sensors aren't picking up anything" she said.

"That's usually good though Colonel" he said.

"No, that's bad Lieutenant. I'm not picking up anything, and I do mean that, ANYTHING. No thermal, no EM, nothing. Every sensor we have can pick up traces of background radiation or some emission, some echo at the highest settings. I don't have any of that. That means something is trying to jam us" she said with a hint of worry in her voice.

"Raven Squadron, this is Cougar 1-1, we're coming to assist with the scan out" they heard as a squadron of Super Long Sword IIs flew in. They were augmented in a lot of ways from the original Long Swords, as they now had shields and better armor, as well as far more missile carriage. They were still nothing compared to a Black Blade, but they were still a vast improvement over the GA-TL1 models.

Sarah and David slid through the wreckages silently, no sound at all in space as they could hear the soft hum of their fighter's generators and engines and their own breathing.

"What was that?" Sarah angled her fighter towards one area as Roberts copied her movements. Nothing was there anymore.

"Did you see something?" Roberts asked her.

"Iâ€¦ I don't knowâ€¦" she said.

"Raven 3-1, what's your status?" Elena asked.

"I think I saw somethingâ€¦ in the wreckageâ€¦ but itâ€¦ it's not there anymoreâ€¦ I'm sorry I didn't see muchâ€¦" Sarah said.

"Well whatever it was that isn't there Sarah, my sensors are clear now" Elena said as she came over an engine pod towards them.

"This is Raven 1-1 to Admiral Hood, no living, no contact. Whatever was here before, it's gone now. Permission to enter atmosphere and start original mission" Elena asked.

"Permission granted Colonel. Good hunting" Hood replied.

"Raven 1-1 calling all Ravens, head to main drop point and watch the skies. Drop your socks, grab your throttle, keep those pelicans from the scrapheap and watch those HEVs. We're cover today" she said over her coms. She got green lights winking in response as she shot after the pelicans holding Renee and her squad, as well as John and his Spartans. They entered the atmosphere and came up to the clouds quickly, receiving anti-aircraft fire as they went.

"Roberts and Jacobs, handle AA 1-4, Merricks and Reist, you've got AA 5-8" she ordered.

"Ghost, that leaves 9-16. Should we head to those after?" Roberts asked.

"Negative. I'll handle those. Keep an eye on the pelicans and the marines. Brutes don't just allow troops to land, they'll be waiting and they'll need air support for any vehicles" she replied.

"You're gonna handle eight AA systems solo?" Jacobs asked astonished.

"We aren't the only aerials here Lieutenant. We're just some of them" she growled. Jacobs went silent.

"Get to work Ravens" she snapped. She got acknowledgements from all of them as she shot forward.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Shinedown "Diamond Eyes (Boom-Lay Boom-Lay Boom)]\*\*

Renee's pelican landed softly on its dampers and she waited for the green light.

The RORO door opened and plasma fire erupted nearby as multiple other pelicans landed and marines spilled out.

"Go go go!" she yelled as her squad ran out opening fire, heading towards a nearby hillock. She ran after, firing as she went in short bursts. A marine in another squad nearby took a fuel rod burst to his chest and went down, and she dove to the ground quickly to dodge a flurry of fire coming at her from the right. Artillery rounds were opening up from both sides, and craters started to show up from all directions.

A warthog drove up, its .50 cal opening up on the right as she got up and ran after her squad, a rocket flying from a kneeling marine as he hit a damaged wraith nearby.

"We need a call in! That artillery line is pounding us and we can't get the tanks in here!" another sergeant nearby said just as he took a beam rifle shot to the shoulder and was knocked off his feet. He rolled and slid up next to the hillock, the damage not breaking through his new armor.

"Gripen! Over here!" Renee yelled out. Milo ran over to her with his communications gear.

"We need a call in for the artillery line! Can you do it?" she asked. He nodded and opened his coms pad.

"This is squad Victor Romeo Two Two Four Bravo calling Fox Delta Charlie Six two response of Barrage Battery Tango One Four Four. We need a strike on coordinates four four zero tap two two niner. I repeat, we need a strike on coordinates four four zero tap two two niner, how copy?" he yelled into his coms rig as rounds flew from all directions. Renee ran crouched below the hillock as red plasma fire flew over her head, and she returned walking fire just over the top of her helmet as she continued her roady dash.

"We need to lower the dart amount a bit Sergeant" A Lieutenant nearby was pushed deep into the hillock, holding a bag of HE-90s in his hands.

"We'll get it done sir" she said and popped up for a second to spray a brute before ducking back down, a sniper CRACK! was heard from another hillock nearby.

"Sarge! Tango One Four Four has no line to the area!" Milo said over the coms. Four elites in blue armor ran past them and towards the brutes before taking a plasma mortar round and disintegrating, one leg flying towards Renee. She pressed against the hillock and saw the leg bounce nearby.

"Heads up! We got air flying in hard!" Milo yelled. Four missiles struck home with the plasma artillery and turned them into scrap. A Black Blade shot off over head to continue its response towards multiple Seraphs.

"Thanks for the backup Raven 2-1!" Renee said over the coms. She got a green light wink in response. Renee jumped the hillock as multiple other squads followed, throwing a hail of grenades as her squad moved forward. A plasma grenade blew up nearby as she could feel even from her range the heat it emitted. She emptied a clip towards the brute that had thrown it opposite of her and jumped into a crater that was in front of her. A warthog drove up nearby, the sound of a grenade launcher firing from the passenger side.

"Sergeant! We need a gunner!" the driver yelled and she looked up from her make shift fox hole. She nodded and ran to the warthog and jumped in the back, pulled back the lever and rotated it towards the enemy positions. The warthog drove on as she released a withering hail of rounds. Two Spartans ran by the warthog at full speed, keeping up with the LRV and leaping over a damaged wraith, taking it by surprise and smashing in the armor panel of the driver's seat and killing the elite inside. Kelly was one of them. John must have been the other.

Kelly jumped into the turret's seat and John pulled out the dead pilot and jumped in, then turned the hover tank around and fired a mortar into a group of rocks that some brutes were firing from. A Long Sword flew overhead followed by a Sabre as they were dog fighting with Seraphs and banshees.

The warthog skidded around a bend and down a slope, over a few rocks the wheels could easily manage, and then straight towards an encampment. Brutes came out at all directions with choppers and brute spike rifles. The driver swerved to dodge a spray of spikes, just as a chopper rammed into another warthog in the distance and blew it to hell.

"Sergeant! Set a strike beacon in the encampment! Barrage Line Tango One Four Four has a link but needs that beacon set!" Lieutenant Wicker said over the coms. Renee was going to be dropping a beacon in the middle of their base, and then getting the hell out of there. She swiveled her turret backwards and tapped the driver on the helmet. He gave her a thumbs up as he maneuvered towards the center, the grenadier in the passenger seat firing a round into a nearby hut that was built and blowing the walls out.

The warthog skidded to a halt as Renee jumped out, a needle rifle round smashing into the side of the hog just as her feet touched the ground. She crouched quickly and pulled her rifle as a brute charged towards her. A plasma mortar crashed into him and vaporized most of his body as a wraith with a Spartan in the turret hovered around the corner then continued on its merry destructive way. The Spartans were heading to the second encampment while the marines were handling the first one. ODSTs had already taken on the third base, but there were still nine others to go for.

"Cpl Gripen! Call in the strike! Beacon is set!" she yelled into her com as she dropped a small grenade like object on the ground and got back into the warthog. The driver put the pedal to the metal as they shot off out of the encampment and away from certain annihilation. A brute ran out in front of them trying to escape, and the driver plowed straight through him, launching the brute into the side of a destroyed revenant.

"Ouch, that had to hurt" the grenadier said as Renee sprayed a brute with a brute shot in hand. The brute lowered the grenade launcher and fired it into the ground below him after the .50 cal shredded his chest, even further doing damage to his body.

"Tango One Four Four ready with volley" she heard over her coms.

"Fire for effect!" Milo yelled in response. A sound that seemed like dull thunder echoed over the rocky valley they were in as the artillery strike was definitely coming. The warthog cleared the area as the 203mm howitzer rounds landed, the impacts creating shockwaves around the landing point. The whole encampment was shredded as the warthog line continued on. "Three down, nine to go!" the grenadier yelled out. It was going to be a very long day.

**\*\*[Eight hours later]\*\***

Elena had just landed for rearming as did the rest of the pilots excluding her squadron. She had used almost every round she had during the assault, with a tracking accuracy of 98.8 percent kill confirm. She never received any return fire because no one knew she was even there most of the time, either through flight maneuvers or a mixture of photo cell paneling and active camouflage. The battle was on its last legs, and almost all the encampments were gone. The Sangheili forces acted as shock troops in front of the marines, teaming with the ODSTs for quick kills.

She jumped out of her cockpit and walked to a small refrigerator that carried an assortment of beverages and small snacks for the pilots to use. She always had a water nipple in her helmet and a multi vitamin cartridge system installed for long flights. The tablets were a mixture of vitamins and minerals and laced with an energy supplement as well as caffeine. It was a better tasting version of the emergency ration bars the marines would eat on the ground.

"Colonel Gripen!" she heard behind her. She turned around as she noticed a medical officer run up to her.

"I have something you are gonna want to see immediately" he told her.

"We're about to head down to the planet, can this wait?" she asked.

"I have vital information for you involving your father" he told her. She already knew everything, why did he have to bring it up after she had calmed down?

"Look, I already know the body-" she tried to say.

"No, you don't. Trust me Colonel. You really want to see this. It's gonna make your day" he said smiling. She was getting annoyed, but she sighed and was resigned to follow. She kept pace with him as he headed to the lift.

"We did the autopsy on the body, cleaned the outside of it and removed the flight suit. Remember how we sent you the dog tags?" he asked. She couldn't forget. She cried again as she received them.

"Yes" she almost whispered.

"Just wait. Once we get there, you'll feel like jumping for joy" he said. She was really confused. What's going on? She was accepting that her father was dead, why was he pressing the issue?

They walked out of the lift and to the medical bay. As they walked in, Elena saw someone she hadn't talked to for over seven years. Her brother, Milo, was standing there. He looked at her and nodded.

"Hey Elena" he said.

"What" how are you" she started to say.

"I know, I know. I'm in the marines. I know you think I'm an idiot for being here-" he told her.

"I'll say. What could possibly motivate you to join? I thought you had an ok job-" she growled out.

"Can it. I didn't have a good job and you know it. I wasn't reaching my potential, and I needed a change. I needed something to change me. And I have. Look, I have a right to be here too, and I'm sorry we haven't talked for a while" he snapped.

"Seven years! You haven't talked to us for seven years Milo!" she barked.

"Seven years that I've been out here fighting Elena! I couldn't respond back! I tried but the retrieval sats were being shot out of the sky! I sent god knows how many letters! Did you receive any of them?" he asked, worried.

"What". No, we didn't. Wait, you mean to tell me you didn't cut yourself off from us?" she asked.

"What? NO! I didn't want to cut myself off from family damn it! Look, I know I was pretty rebellious when I was a teenager, but I've changed. I'm a marine damn it and proud of it. A corporal. I missed you and mom so much it hurt" how is she by the way? I wanted to go

back but we were on a short leash" he said, then almost whispered at the end.

"She's doing fine. She thought you gave up on us" she softly said.

"Yeahâ€¦ I guess I can see that. Look, I didn't ok? And now I'm here. How are you holding up sis? I meanâ€¦ I was a wreck when I found out" he told her while rubbing the back of his neck.

"I'mâ€¦ survivingâ€¦" she replied.

"Yeahâ€¦ I am too. Hey, I see you're a Colonel. Congratulations, ma'am" he said then quickly saluted her. She saluted back.

"At ease. Miloâ€¦ thanks" was all Elena could think of saying. He nodded to her and they both looked at the medical officer.

"I have important news for both of you. Your father, that's not his body" he said. Both of them were shocked.

"What?" Milo asked.

"When we took off the flight suit, we noticed the plasma scarring on the chest was done after post mortem. The body was dead before it was hit. We also found the exact spots of the plasma burns. One of them wasn't fully covering a bullet wound. We checked with DNA samples and facial recognition as well as other scans. It's not him" he told both of them.

They looked at each other and blinked. Elena's eyes started to tear up as Milo just blinked in bewilderment.

"He'sâ€¦ he's alive?" she asked in disbelief.

"Holy shitâ€¦ how? How is that not our father?" Milo asked as he looked between the morgue and his sister.

"We don't know. We have an ONI cryptologist group working on the black box chatter that you couldn't hear. They think he was captured and replaced with a dummy" the officer told them. Elena was almost on cloud nine. Her father could be alive.

"Covenant don't place fake bodies in pelicans though. This isâ€¦ insurgents?" Milo asked.

"I wouldn't be able to answer that, I'm just a doctor. The analysts would be able to tell you more once they repair the corrupted audio logs. It's gonna take time you two, but you have hope now" he said. Her father was alive. After so many days of grieving, both years before and now, she had hope again for her father.

They both walked out of the medical bay and just stood there.

"Ok, brain storm. Seriously. Who do you think did this?" Elena asked her brother.

"I have no idea aside from insurgents Elena. But honestly, what do they have to gain from capturing him? Wait a fucking minute. The plasma rounds through the cockpit. They didn'tâ€¦" Milo trailed

off.

"Where did the rounds impact you mean? That's a good question. We should ask Ezekiel immediately" she said.

"Don't we have to go back down again? Isn't your fighter rearmed by now? I got brought up here by orders for a resupply pick up and to bring a marine in our squad to the medical bay" Milo told her. She looked worried.

"Is itâ€¦ is it your Sergeant?" she asked.

"No, another corporal. Sergeant Kilburn is still throwing down with the brutes on a warthog. They had to change the ammo belt four times already. We're doing pretty well down there for a change. The new armor, the upgraded vehicle protection, upgraded rifles, and we now have air support thanks to you guys. Things are definitely looking up" he told her. Elena sighed in relief. She didn't like the idea of any friendlies getting put out of commission in the medical bay.

"Sergeant Kilburn did get a bonk on the head from a grenade throw though. Scariest thing I'd ever seen. Marine comes running up throwing a grenade, he gets hit with a spike, grenade flies and bounces off her helmet then lands ten feet away. We all ran and dove at the last second" Milo made a low whistle and shook his head slowly.

"One hell of a day isn't it?" Elena said with smirk.

"No shit right? I mean damn. Well, we should head back down I guess" he said.

"I'm going to check on that windshield first. You should come along" she told him.

"Is that an order ma'am? Cause otherwise I have to get back in the pelican" he said smiling.

"Yes, it's an order Corporal Gripen. I need your help with observing damage done to a pelican dropship, then we will both go back down to the surface" she replied.

"Understood Colonel Gripen, I'll assist you" he saluted her and she saluted back. They walked over to the lift and headed back down to the hangar that was holding the original Echo 2-1-2. They entered and both of them suddenly thought twice about being there. The destroyed pelican felt like it was possessed. They tracked down Ezekiel and asked to see the parts they recovered.

"Already on it lass. There is a ballistics analysis already underway, but from what they are saying the plasma rounds would have punctured the glass and into the back of the cockpit, through the middle. They would have missed the pilot's seat" Ezekiel told them.

"So our father was floating around in a damaged pelican, with no one to rescue him and under fire from a battle cruiserâ€¦ There was no other damage on the pelican though, so they didn't pry the doors openâ€¦ and dad wouldn't just open the door for a Covenant boarding party" Elena theorized.



"It's got to be. Sis, he's been taken by Insurgents. Maybe they were scavenging parts and found him in there. But why the body? Unlessâ€¦" Milo helped with the theorizing.

"The insurgents needed a pilot, and if they had one that was thought to be dead, no one would come looking for him and they'd stay under the radar" She finished his sentence.

"We don't have any proof though. The ONI spooks would have to look at the audio logs for anything. The black box has a backup power supply; it would have recorded everything for the next year. The plasma hits must have scrambled the data. Let's hope the spy boys can figure this out" Ezekiel chimed in.

"Not to mention even if they just walked in here and proved our theory, we still have one problem. We don't know where they took him. He could be anywhere" Milo said with a sad tone.

"At least we know something is up though. Milo, grab your kit and head back down and help close up shop. I'll follow in a bit" Elena told him. He nodded and walked out of the hangar.

"It doesn't make any sense, they have pilots, they can train pilots no doubt, so what would be important with my father?" Elena asked Ezekiel.

"I haven't the faintest clue lass. We'll find out eventually though, just you wait" Ezekiel told her. She nodded and walked out to her own hangar, and then put her helmet back on and got into her fighter.

"Hey Zeks, my load says nine Medusas on one pod, can I get the Penetrators?" she asked, mentioning the name of the anionic warhead missiles.

"What, you going pigeon hunting? Aye, we can swap that load if you wish lass. Wouldn't you rather have the Medusas for the time being though? You're cleaning up down there" he asked.

"You never know Zeks; I like to keep my options open. Swap to four four each and I'll stick with another four four Medusas. Last load will be the Twinkies" she said, mentioning a high penetration self-guiding air to ground bunker buster missile.

"Alright lass, we'll have them set up in about twenty minutes" he said. She thanked him and checked her sensors. They were suddenly not showing any echoes again.

"Zeks! Something isn't right! I need those missiles planted now!" she yelled.

"What? What's wrong?" he asked as everyone ran around to get her missiles loaded quickly.

"Sensors are being jammed again. That means whatever was out there has come back" she said gravely.

"Elena, this is Daveth. Have you tried to cut through the jamming with your ECCM? You do have a sync connection to the pod with your

improved neural lace, similar to an AI slicing soft. You should try it my dear, it couldn't hurt" he said softly.

"Will it work though?" she asked.

"This I'm guessing on my dear. This is a theory right now, considering you don't have an AI on that fighter, this is the best I can think of" he said.

"Great. Let's hope I can find whatever it is that's trying to jam us" she whispered.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Raven squadron was flying back up with another squadron of Super Long Sword IIs and had just broken through the atmosphere.

"Sheesh, I'm out of missiles. Anybody else get the assholes who kept firing flares?" one of the pilots said.

"Yeah Cougar 2-3, I got one of those too. Guess they learned something from us during the war as well" Roberts replied.

"Hey, we all learn over time, at least I'd like to think so given how we've seen the technology flow and advance" another pilot from Cougar squadron said.

"Except the monkeys. Those retards probably had the Kig-Yar help them arm the flare systems in. Fuckers probably thought it would hit us and blow our fighters to hell. Boy did that disappoint them" Jacobs said. Everyone chuckled.

"Hey, umâ€¦ I'm getting, I'm getting abnormal readings from that debris fieldâ€¦ again I meanâ€¦" Sarah softly told them.

"Hmm, should we go take a look?" Roberts asked.

"Well, we should be getting back to the Conundrum before we do anything, the CAG is probably waiting for us" Merricks said.

"It couldn't hurt could it? It could be some tech we could use if it's capable of jamming all of our sensors. Sarah, do you want to?" Roberts asked.

"Umâ€¦ wellâ€¦ Iâ€¦ if it makes the Colonel's job easierâ€¦ maybe we shouldâ€¦" she responded. Raven squadron veered off towards the debris field to continue looking.

"Raven squadron, you have deviated from your flight vector, please explain how copy" they heard from CIC.

"This is Raven 2-1, good copy, deviating to investigate a jamming anomaly in the debris field. Will provide information once we have some" Roberts told them.

"Raven 2-1, you are low on ordinance, we suggest you rearm before you head in, but it's your call. Better safe than sorry coming back" CIC told him.

"Copy that, we are still heading in, we'll be back in a few, Raven

2-1 out" Roberts said.

"Alright, let's go find whatever the hell is making that anomaly" Jacobs said as he sighed. For the first time since they had joined, he'd gone from constantly egotistical and ready to prove himself to wary of what they were doing and trying to focus. They had trained hard with each other, and now the squadron he was in was his family. He needed to look out for them.

"I'mâ€¦ I'm out of missiles thoughâ€¦ butâ€¦ I think we canâ€¦" Sarah told them.

"Eh, we got enough to handle anything near you. Your gauss cannons and laser should keep things nice and tidy" Roberts told her.

They flew into the debris field and started to make active scans throughout the area.

"I think the signal is stronger over hereâ€¦" Sarah whispered as she edged her fighter near an engine block.

Suddenly, something came alive and detached from the block itself, and aimed at her.

"Oh fuck! Sarah move!" Roberts yelled as she gunned her engines and a very long energy beam flew out from the object's front. It immediately gave chase after her.

"Shit! Haul ass! CIC this is Raven 2-1! We have hostile contact! We are engaged!" Roberts yelled out.

"Copy that Raven 2-1, Raven 1-1 and Shark squadron is outbound to assist, hang tight" CIC responded.

\*\*[Music: Two Steps from Hell â€" United We Stand â€" Divided We Fall]\*\*

Sarah zipped around more debris fast. The object, what looked like a very stream lined blocky fighter, followed quickly, firing at her with what looked like energy beams. She did not want to be hit by them as she saw them punch clean through multiple pieces of bulkhead debris nearby at the same time.

"It's tracking!" she yelled and fired her afterburners, trying to get a speed advantage. It kept with her as she dodged quickly, dipping under the hulk of a cruiser as Roberts and Jacobs closed at the same time to assist. Both fired two Medusas at it, only to find it had some shields they had never seen before.

"What theâ€¦ damn things got shields!" Roberts yelled as it fired again and Sarah flew straight up to keep from its beams. The thing flipped around and fired at both of them as it continued to follow Sarah.

"Back off! Back off! That thing is maneuverable as fuck!" Jacobs said as he slipped around a bulkhead and came up around the side.

"I need help!" Sarah said as she fired two aerosol grenades from behind her, one of the beams punching through it and striking her shields. They immediately went off line and went to

recharge.

"Fucking hell that thing is powerful!" Jacobs said as he closed.

"We aren't leaving you Sarah! Hang on!" Roberts said as he opened up with his gauss cannons. The thing dodged surprisingly well, as it continued towards Sarah. It powered up its beams and fired again at Sarah.

"I'm hit! My right wing is damaged!" she screamed. Suddenly, out of nowhere, like a tiger pouncing from the shadows, Elena's fighter turned off its active camouflage and flew right over Sarah's fighter, and fired four Penetrators right into its face. The thing's shields flickered as the warheads punched through and struck, doing damage but not crippling it. The unknown fighter dove quickly as Elena shot after it hot on its tail. She was like an angry mother bear, not giving up as it tried to dodge her spray of Vulcan rounds. It flipped and fired at her, but she dodged and returned fire with her laser. The shields took the full brunt of the beam and actually flickered then died, and it flipped and ran.

\_Where the hell do you think you're going. Nobody attacks my pilots and lives\_ Elena thought, and was righteously pissed. She fired two more penetrators as she engaged her afterburners to maximum, sliding up on its right as they dove through the debris field, trading fire at each other.

"Fuck she's even with that thing!" Merricks said in disbelief as they tried to catch up and assist. The object fired two torpedoes from behind, and Elena shot straight up, firing two flares and an aerosol grenade, sliding between two plates and flipped, then fired her gauss cannons straight down at the blocky fighter to keep it taking damage and stop its shields from recharging. The greenish explosives detonated, and she didn't give it another thought as she hit her vector thrusters and continued her dog fight.

"Get him Ghost!" Jacobs rooted as Roberts fired two more medusas at the super box. Elena zipped up to the left of it as it dodged the missiles, and Elena used her targeting laser system to redirect the missiles Roberts fired and veered in a second chance strike as she fired her gauss cannons. The thing's shields shattered and flames could be seen, purplish and blue, but from what Elena could see they were just blowing armor off.

Sarah and the rest of the squadron came in quick, firing whatever they could as Elena sprayed her Vulcans to get the thing to react and dodge in a way to bring it into line with their attacks in case it dodged. The thing seemed to be gaining speed, and Elena engaged her PDWEs to keep with it. She ran right up its aft, swapping quickly through weapons as she saw cool downs, emptying her Vulcans and gauss rounds right into its ass. Parts flew off in all directions.

Just as fast as the fight had begun, it ended, with the boxy fighter entering slip space in a small portal it directed in front of it. Elena was just about to fire her laser after its cool down to follow right into the portal. The portal closed quickly and they were alone again.

"Status check! Who's up?" Elena ordered.

"We're good except for Sarah" Roberts said as they slid next to the damaged fighter she flew.

"My wingâ€¦ the stabilizers won't respondâ€¦ wing apogee thrusters are goneâ€¦" she told them.

"Shit, look at the groove it made!" Jacobs said as Elena looked through her cameras at the damage. A large melted gash ran down the right wing, and close to the cockpit. If it had been a few inches left, it could have killed Sarah.

"Fuck that thing was powerful. I've never seen any Covenant fighter like that" Roberts said.

"I don't think that was Covenant" Elena said in a whisper.

"What do you think it was?" Merricks asked. Elena didn't respond. She had seen the footage Dr. Wright had shown her.

"Colonel Gripen, this is Admiral Hood on a private channel" Elena heard over her coms.

"Go ahead sir" she said as she kept an eye on her pilots.

"I need you to double back and get whatever pieces you can from the fallout that thing left behind. This is a classified maneuver Colonel. And prepare for debriefing once you get back" he told her.

"Understood sir" she replied and flew back as the rest of her squadron headed towards the hangars of the \_Conundrum\_. She engaged a small grappling system and pulled what she could in a magnetic lock under her fighter and into one of her missile bays. She then headed towards the hangars and noticed Sarah's fighter wasn't keeping a good angle.

"Raven 3-1, you are listing too far. You need to re-angle and balance out" CIC said.

"I can't! My stabilizers are gone! I can barely turn!" she said as she was already on an approach course. Elena slid up right next to her.

"Easy Sarah. Sit tight. CIC, she cannot move quickly enough and her apogees are slag, gonna nudge her" Elena reported.

"Colonel, that's highly risky, I don't think that is-" CIC tried to say but Elena would have nothing off it. She opened her switch blade wings and softly tapped under Sarah's, and re-adjusted her angle. Sarah glided in and was latched to the roof emergency locks.

"Thank youâ€¦ ma'amâ€¦" Sarah softly said. Elena winked a green light and fired her thrusters to back off and head to her hangar. She slid inside quickly and efficiently. She landed and turned off her controls and opened her cockpit, then stepped out to find everyone clapping.

"What's this?" she asked Ezekiel.

"You made an unknown fighter cut and run when it wouldn't even leave

with four other fighters engaging it. That is damned impressive lass" Ezekiel said with a huge grin on his face.

"I wouldn't have had to do that if my pilots hadn't acted without my knowledge" she growled.

"Hey, go easy on them, they were trying to help, and they did have that thing under fire. It would have just taken much longer for them to handle it" Ezekiel told her. She sighed and nodded. She watched as the techs opened her left missile bay and watched the debris fall out. Ezekiel cocked his eyebrow and looked at her.

"Do you have a cargo bay on your fighter?" she asked.

"I don't have a fighter lass, but I get your point" Ezekiel chuckled. Elena then turned and walked out of the door and took her helmet off, then walked down the hallway and towards the debriefing room. Veronica Dare and Admiral Hood were standing there, as well as her squadron and Dr. Wright.

"What is said here is classified and doesn't leave this room do you understand? Highest level OPSEC" Admiral Hood told them. They all nodded.

"Raven squadron, you performed admirably out there against an unknown force as well as in the battle on the planet, and kept that object from attacking us in a rear assault. However, that fighter is still an unknown, we do not know of what technology it has and therefore what you saw today you must not tell anyone else, understood?" Hood said. They all nodded except for Elena, who was keeping her eyes glued to Hood's, and he to hers.

"Alright. Dismissed" Hood said. Everyone started walking out of the room.

"Colonel Gripen, not you" Hood said quickly. Elena turned around and stood there at attention. The rest of Raven squadron left and closed the door.

"At ease Colonel. You already know what it was you fought today, and I must admit, I've never seen anyone fight that well out there in my entire time in the UNSC. I can see now why you jumped from Lieutenant to Colonel. You deserve it. You looked out for your squad and kept them focused. You also sent an alien fighter packing. I wanted to ask you, what are your thoughts on this? You've been briefed on it twice, on both sightings, you were there when it first sent out jamming and you fought it now. What's your view?" he asked her. She looked at Veronica and Daveth.

"Sir, I was able to break through its ECM jamming with my ECCM and my augments, but that thing wasâ€¦ unlike anything I had fought before, in the sim training or real combat. Its shields recharged very quickly, its weapons were energy based and capable of penetrating covenant armor paneling. One shot dropped Lieutenant Reist's shields. The second shot nearly carved her right wing off. Admiral, these are top of the line fighter craft, built specifically to handle heavily armed covenant forces. I've never seen a weapon capable of punching through a fighter's shields that fast as long as it wasn't capital ship grade." Elena saw Hood close his eyes and furrow his brow.

"The parts you recovered hopefully can produce a new layering of defense against its weapons. Was there anything other than armor paneling you recovered?" Hood asked her.

"I didn't see much of what I picked up sir. Some panels, a small chunk of something floating along with it, there was some fire emitting from the outside of it, maybe it produced a chemical cloud we can send someone out to test" Elena told him.

"Hmmm, I agree with that. Captain Dare, have a science team prepped and in a pelican, I want a test of where she hit that box. Colonel, good work. We'll talk about this later when we have more information, but until then dismissed" he said and put his hand out for her to shake. She took it and smiled.

"Happy to serve sir" she replied. She then saluted and Hood saluted back, then walked out of the room.

"Are you sure she's not a Spartan 4?" Hood tried to whisper behind her as she walked through the door.

"I'm sure Admiral Hood. Spartans are ground forces, she's something far moreâ€¦ specialized" Dr. Wright said just as the door closed.

Elena walked down the hallway and headed towards the pilot armory. She was tired and her stomach was growling to no end.

As she entered the pilot armory, she saw the rest of her team getting redressed. All of them were used to co-ed rooms except for Sarah, but Elena was still uncomfortable with someone seeing her in the nude. Sarah was waiting for everyone else to change and walk out so she could do it without anyone looking at her. It was usually polite to accept if someone didn't want to be seen in the buff. The guys walked out after saluting Elena.

"Hey, awesome beat down you put on that thing ma'am, really made him think twice" Jacobs said behind him. She nodded and closed the door.

"How are you feeling?" Elena asked Sarah. She looked up from the bench she was sitting on.

"Fineâ€¦" she almost whispered.

"Are you sure? You took one hell of a hit today" Elena said softly. Sarah looked up at her after looking at the floor.

"I didn't fight backâ€¦ I knowâ€¦ I know you keep telling me to fightâ€¦ but I didn't have any more missilesâ€¦" she said, almost apologizing for her actions.

"And you led it on a merry chase while everyone else got shots on it. Sarah, you were caught off guard by a superior foe with advanced technology. You did as well as anyone should expect" Elena said as she patted her on the shoulder and trying to comfort her.

"Youâ€¦ you really think I did ok?" she asked.

"Yes, I think you did alright. Don't worry, the techs are looking at

your fighter right now, the armor is self-repairing and you were low on ordinance. You were also tired. Have you eaten?" Elena asked. Sarah shook her head.

"Not even those vitamin tablets?" she asked. Sarah shook her head again.

"I don't like the flavorâ€¦ I gag each timeâ€¦" she said and looked away. Elena sighed.

"I'm sorry" Sarah said, as if she was apologizing for her body reacting to the taste.

"For what? Your body simply responds to the flavor differently. Don't worry, I'll ask if I can get a liquid supplement set up for you. Are you ok with that?" Elena asked.

"I think soâ€¦ the Nutrivite right?" she asked. Elena nodded. "I'm able to drink thatâ€¦ thank you" Sarah said, and looked up at her and actually smiled. It was a very young and innocent smile, and Elena smiled back.

"Alright, I'll ask Zeks to get your helmet modified ASAP. Right now, however, I think we should go eat. How about it?" Elena asked. Sarah nodded. They both changed, and Elena could almost feel Sarah's eyes wandering her as she got undressed and then put her uniform on. Elena turned around and smiled at her as she finished with her zipper. Elena noticed a very large scar on Sarah's back, but didn't want to intrude or ask her about it. They both finished getting dressed and walked out, a 5' 5" blonde Lieutenant and a 5'10" waist length raven haired Colonel, both of which had their stomach growling like some monster.

"Wow, I must really be hungry, my stomach must be holding my kidneys hostage, I wonder what its demands are" Elena said as they walked down the hallway to the lift.

"There they are! Hey there! Elena!" she heard as they entered the DFAC and saw Buck in the corner with his ODST squad. The Spartans were sitting in an opposite corner, including John. Renee had apparently made up with him in some form, or maybe it was the other way around, she didn't know. The marine sat next to her boyfriend as they motioned for Elena to come sit with them.

She looked between the two tables as Sarah stood next to her, almost like a puppy.

"Hmmm, you know what, let's get a middle table and they can come to us, how's that sound?" Elena asked. Sarah nodded in agreement. She seemed genuinely happy to be near Elena, though she didn't show much evidence of it, as she was constantly shy around others.

Elena walked into the line and grabbed a tray, and Sarah was quick on her heels. Sarah grabbed a chicken sandwich and a bag of chips with an apple and a small soda. She was surprised and her eyes went wide when she saw Elena get two double bacon cheeseburgers, a side of fries and potato salad, two electrolyte drinks and a fruit salad. She topped it off with two chocolate chip cookies and a bag of dried apricots. She even grabbed an energy bar.



"Youâ€¦ you eat all that?" Sarah asked. Elena looked down at her tray and then at Sarah. She felt as if she just insulted her commanding officer about her eating habits.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean toâ€¦ insult you or anythingâ€¦" she said softly.

"No, no worries. I do eat a lot don't I? My body has a really active metabolism, and I need all the calories I can get. I ingest on average twelve thousand to fifteen thousand calories a day. About on the same level as a Spartan" she explained as she sat down at the table. Suddenly, it was like flipping on a light outside of a cabin, and both the ODSTs and Spartans rushed the table like bugs swarming. Elena and Sarah blinked.

"That was unexpected" Elena said in between chewing on an apricot slice.

"Simply sitting near the person who kept an eye on us from above ma'am" Kelly said.

"Oh, you mean that bulkhead that collapsed and I flew under it at Mach 3â€¦ yeah, well, I expected the shockwave to knock it away from you guys. I was heading in that direction anyways, and I figured might as well help" Elena said. Kelly just gave her a thumbs up. She knew Spartans didn't talk much to anyone outside of their little click, but she was an exception. Buck just looked at her in astonishment and blinked.

"Mach 3 huh? Had a need for speed today?" he asked.

"Nope, just another get from point A to point B Eddy. If I really wanted to fly like a bat out of hell I would have hit my PDWEs and knocked you guys on your asses from my height. I'd have hit Mach 12. It's not very viable for fighting though, so no point" she replied as she scarfed down her first cheeseburger. The ODSTs watched in amazement as she emptied her tray, but the Spartans thought it was just another day with their appetites.

Sarah seemed to have finished her food and was looking drowsy.

"You ok? Low blood sugar?" Elena softly whispered to her as she nudged her subordinate's arm gently with her elbow. Sarah woke up quickly and blinked, then nodded and looked at Elena.

"I thinkâ€¦ I think I need to go take a napâ€¦" she said almost in a whisper. Elena saw her get up and put her tray away then walk out of the room.

"Hey, I think I'm gonna escort her to her quarters, she's had a pretty interesting day" Elena said as she got up.

"Oh? Something happen?" Buck asked.

"Iâ€¦ can't explain it, not allowed to, but yeah, something happened Eddy. I'll see you guys later" she waved goodbye and followed out the door and down the hall. Sarah was standing at the lift doors waiting for it to come to her. Elena walked up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. Sarah jumped and snapped her head to look over her shoulder.

"Jesus you scared me!... I'm sorry; I didn't hear you come up ma'amâ€" Sarah said as she looked somewhat shaken.

"Sorry about that, I can't help it sometimes. Didn't mean to frighten you. I just wanted to make sure you got to your quarters ok" she said.

"Iâ€ umâ€ thank youâ€ but, I think I can make it there. You don't have to worry about me ma'amâ€" Sarah said and blushed slightly then looked away.

"Well, I think I kind of do. You're standing in front of a maintenance elevator" Elena said smirking and cocked her eyebrow. Sarah's eyes went wide and she looked at the lift. It was in fact made for drones and maintenance equipment to be moved around. She sighed in embarrassment.

"It's ok. Let me escort you to your quarters. You look really tired Sarah" she said as she brushed some of her blonde hair from the Lieutenant's face.

"Umâ€ thank youâ€ ma'amâ€" she smiled and Elena returned it. She put her arm around her shoulder and turned her around, then walked towards the personnel lift. Sarah leaned against her the whole time. They got into the lift as Sarah looked up carefully, hoping Elena wouldn't notice. She seemed oblivious to her subordinate looking at her with sleepy doe eyes.

The lift opened and Elena walked Sarah down the hall and to her quarters.

"This is it right? Q146-B1?" Elena asked. Sarah nodded and seemed to almost fall asleep right there. Elena picked up her hand and pressed her thumb to the reader. The door opened and Elena walked her in, and then sat her down on the bed. Sarah just flopped forwards on top of Elena on the floor and lay there, as Elena tried to get her shoes off.

"Hee heeâ€ that ticklesâ€" Sarah giggled as Elena shook her head in amusement. She tried to push Sarah off of her, but she was fast asleep and actually hugging her.

"Awkwardâ€" she whispered as she stared down at the Lieutenant, who was now nuzzling into her chest. She didn't have the energy herself to move, as she was tired as well.

"Lieutenantâ€ Sarahâ€ wake up for a minute and get in your bed! Stop that!" she whispered, hoping it was loud enough to wake her. She simply nuzzled some more. Elena definitely felt uncomfortable and unsure of what to do to get her into her own bed and leave.

"Sarahâ€ this is your conscienceâ€ you must let go of Elenaâ€" she tried to say in a spooky voice.

"I don't wannaâ€" Sarah said and her face seemed to contort into furrowed brow and annoyance. Sarah clamped her arms more onto Elena as she tried to slide her off. Elena was actually bewildered. Here was a subordinate of hers who was in all observation being somewhat

intimate with her in her sleep. Did Sarah have feelings for her? Or was it just her subconscious making her feel safe with Elena? She hoped it was a subconscious mother effect she felt due to her watching out for the Lieutenant, and she tried to push her arms off of her. Sarah tried to wrap her legs around her to keep from letting go.

"Oh this is getting ridiculousâ€¦ SARAH!" Elena yelled. Sarah woke up immediately, scared and looking around, as she then pushed back towards the bed and bumped into it, holding her knees to her chin. Elena suddenly realized she had just scared the poor girl out of her wits. It could have brought back memories of her childhood.

"Sarah, hey, it's me. You need to get back into bed, you passed out on the floor" she said, leaving out the bit about her hugging Elena and nuzzling her breasts.

"Huh? What? Iâ€¦ oh myâ€¦ I'm so sorryâ€¦ I didn'tâ€¦ we're here? I'llâ€¦ I'll get in bed right awayâ€¦ thank you for getting me here ma'amâ€¦" Sarah stood up and stumbled a bit, Elena catching her as her center of balance was off.

"Easy there. You need to take your shoes off, and get ready to go to bed. Alright Lieutenant?" Elena asked. Sarah looked up at her with an almost dreamy look, then her eyes focused and she looked around.

"Rightâ€¦ my shoesâ€¦ I need toâ€¦ get ready for bedâ€¦ thank you ma'am" she said and started undressing. Elena waited until she climbed into bed before turning towards the door.

"Elena?... umâ€¦ what do you think of me?" she asked, worried.

"I think you are a capable pilot and good person. Besides that, it's not what I think about you that should have you thinking, or anyone else. You should wonder what you think of yourself, and if you don't like it, try and change it. I also think you need some sleep. Good night" Elena said and smiled. Sarah smiled back and nodded. Elena turned off her light at the door and walked out. She immediately breathed a sigh of relief.

"This better not be another Marcusâ€¦" she whispered to herself. She walked to the lift and headed to her own quarters.

"Cherry, you there?" she asked to the air.

"I'm here Suga, what would you need from me tonight? I'm a mighty bit busy right now, but I guess I got some time for you girl" Cherry, the AI for the ship said. Her voice sounded like an old African American farm worker, and her avatar was a chunky looking African American mother with a bandana holding up her hair.

"I was wondering if you could send me Sarah Reist's personal file before she entered the service" Elena asked.

"Ah, I see I see. Welp, I dunno about dem spooks be happy about it, but lemme see what I can do about it girl" Cherry responded and her image flickered a bit.

"She's my pilot Cherry, I need the information please" Elena said.

Cherry was a good AI, kept her eye on everything and watched people's backs. Despite the looks of her avatar and the personality of a mother, she was a new generation tactical combat AI, and could easily make the \_Conundrum\_ vaporize anything in a heartbeat with its array of weaponry.

"Alright Alright, I'ma gettin it. Here. Take a good look, but don't you be using it to hurt that little flower you hear me? She's been through a lot before she gets with us" Cherry said and with that, disappeared. Elena started to read through her file. Her parents were abusive, her mother was into Red, a narcotic dust that was sprinkled on food for making the taste buds react a different way than intended. Her father was a drunk, and during her thirteenth birthday, while her mother was passed out on the ground, he raped Sarah. He then continued to rape her every day until his liver failed and he died. She was taken into child services at the age of fifteen when her mother was seen as unfit, and in response to this her mother attempted to attack her own daughter, calling her a whore. Sarah had a large scar from a kitchen knife on her back.

Elena was astonished. "No wonder she's so docile" and her actions towards me she must feel she makes me happy and it keeps her from being hurt" Jesus Christ" she whispered to herself.

Sarah had top grades while going through high school, and at one time won a chance for flying lessons. She accepted and learned to fly a Cessna 946. She was then accepted for her skill into the Academy when she met a congressman of the U.S. who sponsored her. Later, it was found out he had used her sexually for payment of his sponsoring. The congressman was impeached, and her sponsorship was kept. She had almost no friends to speak of, as she was constantly in fear of angering someone.

Elena closed the file. She couldn't read anymore. She had already reached her medical file. She had the scar on her back, a broken rib at one point; she was beaten and taken to the hospital before she reached the age of thirteen, and many other things Elena did not want to know.

"Where is the mother now?" she asked to the air. Cherry spoke up despite not showing up on the hologram dais.

"In an insane asylum suga. Where she belongs." Cherry then disappeared again.

Elena had some thinking to do. Sarah needed a full psych evaluation. She didn't want her to ever be hurt again.

(Author's Note: So yeah, Sarah is a bit screwed up. Poor girl. No wonder she doesn't usually throw the punches and just runs a lot. Please review!)

#### 14. Rocky Outcome

\*\*[0900 hours, December 8\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Orbiting Shaquille Colony]\*\*

The fleet was packed back up after three days of fighting on the colony. There were very little casualties with the upgrades the UNSC

now had on most of their equipment, and almost no pilot casualties. The brutes were routed quickly in the first day, and remainders were hunted down for the better part of the next two days. Elena unfortunately was kept up in orbit for the entire time, and was ordered by Admiral Hood to keep an eye out for any return of the alien fighter coming back.

Her ordinance was almost entirely designed for dog fighting now, as her missile racks were revolving around the Penetrator anionic missiles and a micro missile system for harassment. The smaller missiles were nowhere near strong enough to take out a ship or even a fighter on their own, but enough of them hitting a target could destroy it or at least damage the craft. Elena had it equipped simply to keep shields down, as the constant hammering of them would stop the alien fighter from recharging. One pod carried over one hundred grenade sized missiles.

Elena and Dr. Wright were starting to realize that the Black Blade's 20mm Vulcans were now being considered obsolete despite the specialized ammunition they were using. The original intent was not for dog fighting, that was what the gauss cannons were for, but to assist in ground assaults. Most wraith tanks turned into swiss cheese in seconds from a burst of the Vulcans. Even scarabs would lose a leg quickly from a full spray of dual armor piercing Bull Dozer rounds.

"We're working on miniaturizing the particle cannons so they aren't expansion equipment my dear, and a newer Vulcan system that is stronger than the 20mm you're using" Dr. Wright told Elena as he stood in the hangar bay viewing room above while she sat with a drink in hand in a chair watching the maintenance below.

"Yeah, thanks for that. The 20mm were just gnat shots against that fighter last time—we have any more information on it since that time?" she asked and sipped on her fruit juice.

"We've sent back the debris you were able to recover, and may I say ONI is sending its thanks for that. They actually have their collective eye on you" Dr. Wright told her chuckling. She didn't smile.

"I'll pass on any job offerings they hand out thank you very much. I don't trust them as far as I can throw them. I'm Air Force, and last time I checked we have our own secret agency don't we?" she asked.

"Oh, you could say that. They make ONI look tame in comparison" he smiled.

"I don't know who they are though" she sighed and sipped her drink.

"I hope you never do. They're friendly enough, but they're even better at keeping secrets and blending in than ONI is. You wouldn't even tell if someone was one of them. Ah, we've spoken a bit much about a group of people we barely know exist. Back to the fighter" Dr. Wright said, swapping back to the subject they were discussing.

"Alright, so, the 20mm need an upgrade. Can we get the 50s installed

on the next iteration?" she asked.

"We think alike on that my dear. It's already done, I sent a notice for those to be replaced soon. They're still smaller than the cannons on a Long Sword, as that craft has a 120mm ventral, but what you lack in size will be significantly improved in ammunition type. I had a small chat with your friend, Marcus at his company. Very smart man may I say. The ammunition is based on a diamond compressor they have. The diamonds they produce are used in the focus systems of the M6 GRINDELL nonlinear rifles used for ground forces, and the excess unusable ones tend to be kept for re-bonding." Elena looked at her fighter as the maintenance was being done on it. She was so tired from running boring patrols without her squadron in orbit. They were the ones who went down to the surface and helped in the clean out.

"Re-bonding? So what does that have to do with the ammunition?" she asked.

"We've found a way to use that cast off in the ammunition. Diamond tipped rounds with a quartz underlayer and high explosive. It's both shield piercing and armor piercing. There is also an armored encasement that reacts once the outer shell detonates, and a small nanite pod opens up to continue damaging their surroundings. They search out for power signatures. Against shields the nanites would be destroyed easily, but against armor once you've penetrated the shieldsâ€¦" Dr. Wright trailed off.

"A poison dart. Now that's useful. I'd take a guess as to the expense for it?" she asked.

"Actually my dear, you'd be surprised the cost isn't that much higher than what you are using right now. Since it's cast off from compressors creating full perfect diamonds, we have the compressors now just create nothing but cast off chips" he told her. She seemed surprised.

"Alright, that sounds good. The next one is I heard we have an EMP cannon that can be equipped?" she asked.

"Um, yesâ€¦ thatâ€¦ you see my dear; that is carried by the X23 NNEMP Gremlin vehicle. We can get one for you, but the thing is somewhatâ€¦ difficult to repair. Your friend Ezekiel expressed concern with that. It also does not repair from the nano weave armor on your fighter like most of the other equipment, and it will require an upgrade to the generator. We've already been working on a dual layer pinch fusion reactor that can seal itself off in the event of overheating, with a twin ion generator to replace yours right now. Should provide far more power when you need it, and less of a cool down on the laser battery you have" he said as he wrapped his knuckles against the armor of the Black Blade.

"Ok, so new cannons, new power supply, new EMP cannon, the particle cannons are being miniaturizedâ€¦ wait, the particle cannons aren't going to be expansions anymore? Are you developing some new housing for them or something? They broke stealth characteristics pretty easily" she said as she looked off towards the vehicle armory, and saw both of the cannons through the small door window.

"Mainly, yes, and shortening the barrel. Newer advances in focusing

control have made the need for a longer barrel moot my dear. Gone will be the day of having two tusks growing from the front of your craft and obscuring vision" he said smiling.

"Not obscuring my vision, just Merricks. He loves those thingsâ€¦ I'm about to authorize him to have them installed what with that thing lurking out there" she grumbled.

"Yes, I can understand your wariness. We've been working on a new ECCM system to replace what you have now, and it is being transferred as we speak. It should be able to cut through what that thing was able to produce to jam your sensors, though considering you've found out how to cut through it on your own, I don't know if it is much of an improvement. Still, useful for the rest of your squadron." Dr. Wright swapped between files on his data pad to cover more information he had.

"Ah yes, the new P-2 anionic missile is coming along nicely. Should provide more of a punch than what you have now. Until then, you'll just have to hit the right spot and hope it's something essential. Knowing you however, that makes no difference. The engines are also being upgraded. Nothing especially fancy, simply better materials for cooling and control. Should allow you to eek out a bit more speed, but nothing especially amazing. Well, thank you my dear on your report log for your craft. I've read over the reports of the others in your squadron, but frankly, all theirs says is "Awesome craft, simply awesome." I believe yours has far more detail in suggestions for upgrades and capability" he said grinning.

"I said it how I was supposed to. The Black Blade is an incredible fighter, however against what we just dealt with, I'm surprised we won. Next time I might not be so lucky. That thing ran because I caught it off guard, and continued to attack it quickly and aggressively. Daveth, you saw the video footage. The shields ignored four medusas, the anionics simply took armor off, and the Vulcans did nothing but annoy it. Gauss cannons seemed to weaken the shields, but not by much. Don't even get me started on that thing's weapons eitherâ€¦" she sighed.

"I can understand my dear. We noticed the shields recharge quite quickly, with almost no delay before the start of the recharge cycle. That's very impressive. We calculated it took only a second for it to start recharging. Even the Spartan's MJOLNIR armor takes at least 4 seconds, and the Sabre and the Black Blade take three. The power source on that thing must beâ€¦ highly advanced my dearâ€¦ more so than even the forerunners maybe" he said softly, almost as if someone would hear.

"That's disturbing. Someone out there more powerful than forerunners and they're hostile to us. Not something I really want to accept" she said in a worried tone.

"Well, you were able to outfly the thing, all we need to do is advance our technology significantly enough for you to win the next time. I hope that will be much later my dear. Well, I should send this information off for the Skunk works to work on the Black Blade II" he said and patted her on the shoulder. She nodded to him and continued watching the maintenance down below and finished her drink.

"Oh, by the way, I cannot believe it slipped my mind, my apologies my dear. Your shields are going to be modified a bit. We've found a way to provide a better defense not through Covenant or Forerunner technology, but by age old stealth technology. The shields will be auto angling if hit, providing quite a bit more defense against beam weapons and projectiles. It will still react the same against explosives, but it should provide a better defense against the new threat." Elena looked up at him and cocked her eyebrow, then remembered just how stealth technology worked back in the day. Matte black armor paneling to ignore radar signatures. She wondered how that would look if her shields had to activate with a beam hitting it. She suddenly didn't want to find out.

"Thanks. You wouldn't per chance know where we're heading now do you?" She asked.

"I believe the next colony is called Erule. It is surrounded by an asteroid field from what I hear. The Jiralhanae have contracted some Kig-Yar to assist them in ambushing ships there, and they have a sizeable pirate fleet. You'll have to be on your toes while we head to the colony" Dr. Wright said. She nodded and thanked him, and he walked out of the viewing room.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

"Alright lady and gentlemen, we are going to run simulations on going through the asteroid field today" Elena told her squad as they stood around her.

"Butâ€¦ we already know how to maneuver through asteroid fields ma'am" Roberts told her.

"Not with pirates attacking you don't. This is why I'll be fighting against you" she told them. They all groaned.

"In a pirate tug, not a Black Blade for the simulations" she finished. They looked up at her.

"Don't get cocky, this is why I want to run these. I want you to expect the unexpected. The tug I'll have could be equipped with anything do you understand? Mine laying equipment, stolen nukes, EMP cannon for boarding, flash bangs, grenade launching, tow winches and cable lines, the list goes on. You fly into the wrong area, and boom" she said and made hand gestures emphasizing the explosions. They nodded in agreement.

"I didn't know insurgents or pirates could be so adaptive ma'am. I've never fought anything besides Covenant" Jacobs told her.

"Now is your chance to learn. I'm going to try and pull every trick in the book to kill you guys in there, and you may die a lot, or a little, depending on how careful you are and what I can think up to catch you off guard. Are you ready?" she asked. They nodded and she escorted them to the sim pods.

"Alright, let's begin" she told them.

\*\*[1900 hours, December 8\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Leaving Shauille Colony]\*\*



Elena had put her squad through the wringer. She had mined multiple asteroids, planted nukes, placed cable lines to snag the fighters, blinded them and disabled their fighters with hardened EMP cannons. That was a thought she soon realized she needed to be fixed and sent an email to Dr. Wright immediately for the Black Blade IIs involving EMP shielding.

She had attacked them guns blazing while they were sorting through asteroids, slung them into asteroids and hired mercenaries to try and overwhelm them. She still had other tricks to use on them, but they were getting tired.

"God I'm dead again" Jacobs said.

"I am too" Merricks replied.

"Yeah but you weren't an idiot and flew around that last asteroid while she detonated a mine inside the thing. Damned fucker split in two and crushed me against another asteroid. That's a new one" he laughed.

"I take it you are not bored Lieutenant?" Elena asked with a smirk.

"Actually ma'am, no I'm not. It was boring dying so many times at first, but now, at least we're learning about this you know? I never expected mines to be so versatile" he responded.

"Yeah, no kidding right? Hey, um, Elena, how are you getting the mines in the asteroids? Drilling before?" Roberts asked.

"That's an interesting question David. Yes actually. Before you came in, I set the map up and drilled into multiple asteroids for this" she replied.

"Ok, so, that would mean we could detect vibrations or debris around right?" he asked. She smiled.

"Sweet. Thanks ma'am. All we have to do is look for craters that have drill debris near them for next time" Jacobs said. They all seemed genuinely eager to learn the different attack strategies the pirates could use.

"Please make a note all of you, this is not how pirates could fight you, this is how I'd fight you if I was a pirate. They may act differently than this, but at least you'll be careful" she told them.

"Oh I can see one way you couldn't prepare us ma'am" Merricks said.

"And what's that Merricks?" she asked.

"They could use diplomacy ma'am. They could use bribery to get us to ignore them, and when our back is turned, drop a fuck ton of rounds into our aft. You can never tell if they're for real or not" he told her. She thought for a moment and nodded.

"You're right, but that wouldn't be our problem as the ambassadors and ONI spooks on board would be able to respond to that for us, plus

the dozens of AIs that could read tonal pitch in responses and other biological readings to see if someone is lying or for real. If we're sent out, it'll be to fight or escort transports. Point and shoot, not talk" she told him.

"I guess your right ma'am. We just have to take them out before they take us out" he responded.

"God I'm hungry" Roberts said as his stomach growled.

"Yeah, dinner time. Alright boys and girls, we're stopping for the day. We'll pick up tomorrow at 0900 and do it again. I want to make sure you guys don't get caught unprepared. Dismissed" Elena said and they saluted. She saluted back and they walked out of the sim room.

"Being pretty hard on them I'd say lass" Ezekiel said as he walked up with a data pad.

"Better safe than sorry. An Asteroid belt is a pilot's urban warfare. There's no telling where something nasty could pop out. I'd rather not write condolence letters if I have to." Elena sighed and scratched her head.

"I hope the other squadrons are as expectant of an attack as me. I'd hate to see our squadron make it no problem but see everyone else get caught half blind. I wonder if they're running sims too" she said.

"I would take a guess as to yes Elena. Knowing how dangerous this next colony could be simply getting there, I doubt they wouldn't be refreshing on their belt strike flights" Ezekiel said as he tapped a few buttons on his data pad. Elena's stomach growled.

"I better get something to eat. I'll see you tomorrow Zeks" she said and patted him on the shoulder and walked out.

\*\*[0600 hours, December 10\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Slip Space towards Erule colony]\*\*

Elena woke up early to head to the gym for a work out. She went immediately to the tread mill and started it at a jog.

"Hey you, haven't seen you around for the past few days" Renee said as she got onto the tread mill next to her.

"Hey, yeah, been busy. Erule colony is gonna be a bitch" Elena grumbled.

"How so? I heard it wasn't going to be so bad. Mostly pirates and rebels and" oh" Renee replied but then realized what that entailed.

"Exactly. Dog fighting. Very little ground combat, and lots of taking on hidden things. You guys are going to be doing urban warfare down there I heard though. Rooting out key rebel factions hidden in the cities" Elena said as she continued her jog.

"Yeah" we have a team of Sangheili Majors joining my squad to help find rebels. Just as they say all humans look alike, the feeling is

mutual for us. I wouldn't be able to tell if someone was a rebel or just a civilian, especially if they're an alien race" Renee chuckled.

"Hey, I heard John and the other Spartans are training hush hush in a sealed off part of the ship" Elena said. Renee looked at her.

"So that's why I haven't seen him the past few days! He's been awfully stand offish latelyâ€¦ I wonder if I did something to make him angry?" she asked.

"Doubtful. I heard a rumor they're going to be equipped with booster frames to help us pilots through the asteroid belt. He and Linda are going to be flitting around with my squadron. That's probably why he hasn't had much time to be with you" Elena told her.

"Oh, well that's good in a way! I still feel alone without him, but if he's helping you guys then I can survive until this battle is over" Renee smiled.

"I can't. I kind of wish they weren't assigned with us. Those battle frames have no stealth characteristics to speak of. They stand out like a sore thumb. Would rather he stay inside and wait for us to do our job" Elena chuckled.

"Are you trying to tell me that Spartans are liabilities for you? Wow, I've heard it with Spartans and us marines, but that's funny" Renee giggled.

"It's true! We're used to zero g combat and staying in the air. They're used to being on the ground. Frankly I feel they'll get in the way of us flight jockeys. You can tell him that one if you like. It's simple experience. We're trained for this. They just sort of help where they're needed in space. We excel at flying" Elena said and turned off the tread mill and walked to the cable machine.

"Oh, I think he'll get a kick out of that. He probably won't feel insulted at all either. I think he knows where he stands these days. Super soldier, and not super pilot. That title belongs to you" Renee smiled and sat down on a dumbbell bench and started putting weights on.

"I just do my job RenRen. I just do my job" she said as she started pulling. Renee stopped putting weights on the bar and sat staring.

"What's wrong?" Elena asked.

"That's the first time I've heard you use my nickname" she said.

"Umâ€¦ ok? Bad nickname, don't like the nicknameâ€¦?" Elena asked.

"No, justâ€¦ that's what a friend used to call me a long time ago" she said and seemed to be remembering a past memory.

"Should I stop using it? I can stick with Renee or Ren if you prefer, I don't want to make you uncomfortable" Elena said as she stopped pulling and looked at her.

"No, it's fineâ€¦ don't worry about it. Just thinking that's all" she said and broke into a smile, but Elena could see it was a show.

Elena shrugged. "If you say so" she said and went back to her pulls. Renee got under the dumbbell and started doing sets.

"Well all be, how's it going Ghost?" they both heard and Elena shot up. She looked at the door.

"No fucking way. I didn't know you were stationed on this ship!" Elena laughed out. Standing in the doorway was Mark Jones.

"And I thought you were grown up the first time I met you! Sheesh, guess they let you bum around back then cause of Jack huh?" Jones chuckled.

"Yeah, well, don't let that fly around please. Keep it on the low down. Not many people know about that" she grinned and got up to hug him.

"God it's good to see you again. It's been way too long girl. How have you been?" he asked.

"I'm good, you? I heard you survived theâ€¦ you know, being sent out" she replied.

"Yeah, a lot of pilots didn't make it. I was one of the lucky ones" Jones said in a low voice.

"Well at least a good pilot survived that battle. I hear you're a Lieutenant Commander now" she said smiling.

"Yeah, I keep the kids working in our squadron. But look at you, seriously, a Colonel? Sheesh, you really are bad ass, ma'am" he said, and then saluted suddenly as he realized what she was.

"At ease Commander, we're in the gym after all" she giggled.

"Sorry, force of habit these days. So I heard you were looking for me before. Wanted to incorporate me into your wing I think?" he asked with a smirk.

"Yeah, that doesn't go over too well with cross transfers between different branches as I later found out. Still, I had hoped" she laughed.

"Yeah, makes me wish I was Air Force sometimes. Still, being a Lieutenant Commander isn't bad. I'll be a Commander in six months" he said with a small grin popping up on his face.

"Well early congratulations. Aww fuck, where are my manners. Mark Jones, this is Sergeant Renee Kilburn" Elena suddenly turned around and saw Renee had stopped her sets and was just sitting there.

"My pleasure Sergeant" Jones said and shook her hand. Renee just stood there grinning.

"Yes Ren, he's a commissioned officer. Same as me. You don't have to

feel awkward around him" Elena chuckled.

"Yes ma'am. Nice to meet you sir" she said and saluted. Jones looked back and Elena and cocked an eyebrow. Renee felt awkward.

"At ease Sergeant. Gym rules override rank most of the time. This is a downtime area, not a formal meeting. Still, good to meet you. You're the one with the Master Chief right?" he asked. She nodded.

"I'm surprised you didn't snag one of those Spartans fly girl" he chuckled.

"I'm engaged to a fire fighter in San Francisco bub" she smirked.

"Ah! That's great news! I'm really happy to hear that! He's a lucky man. Hey, I just shot over here to see you then I gotta head back out to help my commander snag the sim pods for our squadron" he said.

"Thank you! wait, what? Sim pods? My squadron is using them today" she said.

"Um! we scheduled them Elena. You didn't check the list?" he asked.

"I made the list Mark. Wait, we're not talking about the same sim room are we?" she asked.

"Lemme think. Sim room 4?" he asked.

"Nevermind. We have sim room 1" she said and sighed.

"You know, this is new having multiple sim rooms. Hell, remember when we had just the two hiding in the maintenance office down in the hangars?" he said chuckling.

"God! and swapping through the different flight ops was a pain in the ass" she giggled.

"Yeah! Half the time it was set to a Sky Hawk's score sheet!" he laughed. Elena rolled her eyes and laughed.

"Ah, good times. Hey, I really should get going. You said you're training your pilots in sim room 1 right?" he said.

"Yeah, room 1. I'm training them in pirate tactics in a modified tug against our fighters" she told him. He whistled.

"I've seen what your fighters can do Elena. I wish I had one of those. We're lucky we have Sabres now. I got trained last year in one. Impressive things they are, with the shields and new missiles. You said you're using a tug to fight them though?" he asked. She nodded.

"Lemme guess, they lost" he chuckled.

"Multiple times. I think they've seen just about everything a pirate could use against them though, at least what I'd think up if I was a

pirate." He cocked his eyebrows and looked at Renee.

"Knowing her, that means things the pirates would be too stupid to think up. Still, doesn't hurt to be prepared." He looked over at Elena again and smiled. She sighed out loud and rolled her eyes.

"I'll go I'll go. It was good to see you again fly girl" he said and hugged her again.

"Good to see you too. Crash and burn" Elena smirked and put her fist out for a knuckle bump.

"Crash and burn" he replied bumped his knuckles against hers, and then walked to the door.

"Wow, I didn't know you knew so many people from during the war" Renee said as she walked up next to her.

"Yeah, he was sent off with the rest of his wing to a sector of space under attack while I was with my father when I was thirteen. He was in the same wing as some bastard who tried toâ€¦ well, he was just a bastard" Elena told her and corrected herself at the end.

"Something happen?" Renee asked.

"Iâ€¦ don't really like talking about it. It was swept under the rug and now what's done is done. The pilot who did it is dead now" she replied.

"Did he hurt you somehow back then?" Renee asked.

"Heâ€¦ promise you won't tell anyone? Not even John?" Elena asked. Renee nodded.

"Back when I was on the Honor Bound John was ordered to escort me from the shadows, keep me from harm's way. It was a test. I can't go into details on why the test was done, but I can tell you I was in a gym like this one. The pilot in question came in with two of his friends and started badgering me, so I tried to leave. That's when things got out of hand and they grabbed me" she explained. Renee looked horror stricken.

"Did theyâ€¦" Renee trailed off.

"No, they never got the chance. John came out of nowhere and threw one into a wall, socked the one holding me and launched him in the air, and was going to choke the pilot to death on the ground. I got him to stop, but still, the whole thing wasâ€¦ dramatic to say the least. If he wasn't there, I'm sure they would have raped me." Elena sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry, you don't have to tell me any more if you don't want to. At least John was there to help" Renee said and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah, well, as I said, what's done is done. The pilot is dead somewhere in space and life goes on you know? I umâ€¦ I kind of want to drop this Ren. Sorry" she said. Renee nodded and they both walked out to get breakfast.

\*\*[0800 hours, December 11\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Slip Space towards Erule Colony]\*\*

Elena watched with fascination as the Spartans weaved and slipped through their training in the Zero g environment. She was bored with the sim room as her squadron was now getting used to all of the tactics she pulled with the tug and even tried blowing up each asteroid themselves, which was actually a sound tactic as her tug ran to hide. She distinctly remembered hearing Jacobs yell "FUCK THIS!" before unloading all of his ordinance into the asteroids, blowing them apart and causing debris to scatter everywhere, forcing her tug to back off and escape further into the belt.

Now they were capable of getting through her training with very little problem. The Spartans disabled a fake bomb in one section then rolled around a large crate they used as an asteroid. No one aside from high ranking officers and Spartans was allowed into the section, so Elena felt honored that she was allowed to observe. John actually gave her a thumbs up and a Spartan smile, and she returned both as he glided through the air with no gravity to stop him.

"Alright, everything looks good for space walks. Let's get back to the sim room for the booster frames" Fred told them. John wasn't the ranking Spartan in the room anymore, as Fred was now a Lieutenant.

"Come to see us ground pounders zip through the air ma'am?" Fred asked.

"Yup, I just completed training my squadron yesterday. I'm pretty sure they're fit for asteroid combat. I have a question if I might be so inclined" Elena asked him as the other Spartans started to file out of the room once the gravity was returned to normal.

"Shoot ma'am" he said.

"Is it possible to provide a stealth cover in any way to the booster frames?" she asked. Fred looked at John and he shrugged.

"I believe they tried that ma'am. Doesn't work with the design" he responded.

"Hmmm, answers my question. Oh well, we'll adapt like we always do. Just asking" she sighed and walked towards the door.

"Is that going to be a problem ma'am?" he asked as the other Spartans looked at her.

"No, no problem I think. My squadron is just going to have to get used to booster frames zipping around in front of them. They're sort of used to being the fastest thing out there right now. I'm just fine with having back up. I've already flown alongside the Short Sword Bombers so it doesn't worry me much" she told him.

Kelly watched the both of them talking. "Well, we Spartans will make it easy for you up there, so don't worry" she told Elena. Elena blinked and looked at Kelly. She seemed to have a smug look on her face.

"Kellyâ€|" Fred growled.

"What? I'm simply saying how we'll handle the problems that arise and let them fly through. We are Spartans, it is normal for us to escort others" she said. Elena's eyebrow twitched.

"Escort? Petty Officer, you're assisting Super Long Sword IIs. I can understand you saying that about them, but I am a whole different ball game" she retorted.

"We'll just have to wait and see ma'am" Kelly replied. Elena could tell that Kelly was full of herself. She knew the Spartan was one of the fastest on the ground, and reacted almost as quickly as she could, but that was only without a cortex scanner and everything else she had. With her cortex scanner Elena knew she could literally see in slow motion and her reaction time was a tenth of what she was without, which was already lower than the Spartans to begin with. Elena was designed to fly. Kelly was designed to fight. On the ground.

"I thought you had respect for us pilots Petty Officer. What happened to change your mind?" she said with a small smile creeping onto her face.

"Nothing has changed ma'am, but it's simply a fact. We're faster at responding, we can see farther and we shoot with greater accuracy" Kelly told her. Elena really thought she was full of herself now.

"Alright. Fair enough. I can understand you saying that about a normal pilot" Elena said. There was no point in arguing with her if she was set in that way.

"Ma'am? Normal?" Kelly looked suddenly confused. She clearly had no idea Elena was augmented.

\_It's supposed to be classified I knowâ€| \_Elena thought.

"That's enough Petty Officer" Fred growled.

"Sir" she said flatly. There seemed to be some tension between the Spartans, and Elena didn't want to be a part of it.

"Apologies Colonel" Fred told her.

"I gave her permission Lieutenant. It's alright. I can see how she can think that what with your strength and speed as well as your armor. Well, I'll let you guys get to the sim room. Pleasure talking with you all" she said. They saluted her and she saluted back, then they all walked out of the room. Elena smirked and just shook her head. She was getting tired of proving herself over and over. It wasn't that she was being egotistical, she simply didn't like being looked down on.

Elena walked out of the room and down the hall to eat.

\*\*[0900 hours, December 12\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Approaching Erule Colony]\*\*

Elena slid into her cockpit and closed the hatch. She did her



preflight check and was locked onto the mag rail. She then was given her launch number and sat for a minute, before being fired from the tube like a bullet. The rest of her squadron slid in next to her as two booster frames came up.

Elena slowed down a bit with her forward thrusters as she didn't know how fast the booster frames could go, and didn't want to end up plowing into them and explaining it to Renee.

"You can go faster than that right?" John asked. Elena smirked.

"We just held back for you geezers on your mopeds that's all" Elena chuckled.

"Ouch, that hurt, right to my heart. How vicious you can be" John laughed.

"Alright, touch the nose and let's get on with this. Raven Squadron, follow the boosters. I'll run drag and keep an eye on your exit" Elena said. Her squadron winked green lights and headed forward carefully into the asteroid belt.

"Sarah, keep your scanners at max, Merricks keep your ECCM working" Roberts said. They both acknowledged as they slid through the small paths between the asteroids, other paths closing as some mountain sized ones crashed into each other.

"Surprised pirates would try and stay alive out hereâ€¦ too much damage could happenâ€¦" Jacobs said as he looked from place to place.

"Not for us to judge, just kill. Keep your eyes frosty" Elena told him.

"Yes ma'am, just worried about the asteroid movements. Waitâ€¦ Colonel, ma'am, you used mines inside the asteroids against us? What about thrusters buried into them?" he asked. Elena blinked. There's no way they'd try and sling asteroids at them.

"It makes sense. Spartans hold up right now!" Elena barked over the coms. John and Linda came to a stop with their thrusters and looked back at them.

"What's wrong?" John asked.

"Drop a scanner beacon on a nearby asteroid. I hope Jacobs isn't rightâ€¦" Elena said worriedly.

"I hope so too ma'amâ€¦" Jacobs replied as Linda flew to an asteroid and attached a scanner beacon to it. The signal popped out quickly, waves of information coming back to them.

"Son of a bitch there's gotta be a whole corridor of booster modified asteroids in front of usâ€¦ good call Jacobs. We're going around" Elena said. Jacobs chuckled on the other end.

"I was kind of hoping for there not to be any ma'am. Still, that's a whole new way to fight. Hey Spartans, detecting anything out of the ordinary that we haven't picked up? You never know" Jacobs said.

"Nothing. We'll keep you posted if we see anything odd" John said. The squadron zipped back and around two asteroids then slipped through a large hole on a large asteroid in the shape of a rough donut.

"Ok, something isn't rightâ€¦ anybody else getting way too many echoes?" Roberts asked.

"We're getting the same readings out here. The asteroids must have a metal that's screwing with our scanners. Motion tracking is still good though" John replied.

"That'sâ€¦ that's a bad thing thoughâ€¦ we could get caught blindâ€¦ shouldn't weâ€¦ should we group with another squadron?" Sarah asked.

"Heads up! Hostiles sighted! They've opened fire! Collision! Returning fire!" A sabre pilot yelled and an explosion followed by a flare of shields was seen in the far distance.

"Son of a bitch, we really are fighting blind out here. Too many damned echoes!" Roberts said as Raven squadron moved to engage. They were cut off suddenly by a barrage of gatling turrets attached to the asteroids.

"Break off! Drop aerosol grenades! Should screw with their targeting!" Elena yelled as Raven squadron flew up and away, dropping small bomblets that opened up and disperse a mixture of argon gas, copper filings, iron filings and quartz shavings.

They all whizzed by and up over another asteroid, as Merricks operated a VOLCANO mine layer system to cover their tracks.

"Tangos on vector four four three-" "We've got multiple contacts trying to intercept-" "Verified hostiles, we are engaging" chatter was heard over the coms as all fighter squadrons engaged a very aggressive pirate fleet.

"Shit, having difficulty with locking onto this fucker!" Merricks growled as he dove after a very clumsy fighter.

"Those echoes are knocking our locks off kilter, do not fire blindly, we don't have enough missiles to do that and hit an asteroid. You could blow debris off and kill yourself" Elena warned as she shot off towards two tugs trying to drop a mine field.

"Copy that, looks like it's knife fight range until I can get a decent lock then" Jacobs replied as he shot up and away from a pursuing fighter coming after him.

"Look! Umâ€¦ boarding craft!" Sarah spotted multiple transports going in the opposite direction of them.

"Shit, they're leading all squadrons deeper into the belt away from the fleet! \_Conundrum!\_ You've got incoming boarders heading straight towards you! I don't know how they'll get by the shields, but suggest Spartans return and defend the ships. They planned this out" Elena said over the coms as she shredded a V wing from a fighter and sent it careening into an asteroid.

"Understood, all Spartans defend the fleet" Captain Dare said as their auto cannons opened up outside.

"We're handling multiple tugs trying to mine the area ma'am, if we leave now it could take days to find and detonate them" Kelly said over the coms.

"Negative, come back and defend the fleet" Dare ordered. Kelly shot past another asteroid and fired her chain guns at a fighter defending a tug, as the tug shot through a very large asteroid with multiple corridors.

Jacobs zipped after two fighters towards the same asteroid and got a lock on one.

"Finally, I got a lock ma'am, it seems only some of the asteroids have the metal that's screwing with us. Taking two on and heading back around" he said as Elena flipped and headed to assist.

"Keep an eye on the exit Jacobs, I know you have two easy pickings but they could be leading you" she warned.

"I know ma'am, I'm keeping an eye on the door and my foot on the breaks in case they are waiting for me" he said. She sighed in relief. He was thinking carefully. She taught them well.

Kelly headed straight towards the tug who was diving into the cross corridor in the asteroid and saw another tug fly right by her with no one on its tail. She only had one chance to get both. She opened her wings and fired a double volley of missiles without a lock straight at the tug heading into the corridor and shot after the tug that ran away in another direction.

Jacobs saw a tug slide by him in the crossing and continued on, right after the second fighter. The missiles flew straight down the corridor and locked right onto him. He flew down the corridor and suddenly found multiple missile locks on him from behind.

His shields failed and he was trailing smoke from damage to his wings.

"Mayday! Mayday! Friendly fire on Raven 4-1! What the fuck! I have damaged thrusters! Forward thrusters barely functional!" Jacobs yelled over the coms.

"I'm coming to assist! What's the damage?" Elena asked.

"Thruster control was hit by a barrage of fucking booster frame missiles or something, I'm leaking hydrogen and my shield emitters are damaged. Nano weave is working to repair, but I have no first defense!" he told her.

"Fuck, this was a screwed up run! We need to get back to the fleet! Jacobs can you move?" Elena asked.

"I'm functional but maneuvering is difficult. Oh shit!" he suddenly yelled as he saw on the exit of the corridor two tugs and the two fighters flip around and aim at him.

"They're waiting for me and I can't back off with the damage!" he yelled as they opened fire on him. He tried to dodge but his thrusters had difficulty responding.

"Jacobs! All Ravens! Respond immediately and assist!" Elena barked and shot fast towards the asteroid he was at. She saw the two tugs and two fighters firing at him, as the right wing ripped off and the armor chipped away quickly all over. She fired two missiles quickly into the first tug then fired her laser straight through the second, and hit the first fighter on the exit path. The second fighter ran but she was already on it, firing her Vulcans and shredding it.

"They called for backup" Roberts told her. Four armored tugs flew over an asteroid and opened up on her and Jacobs. He wasn't responding to calls. Multiple turrets woke up outside of other asteroids and fired at her.

Elena pushed her fighter right in front of Jacobs's, using herself as a shield and maxing her front arc with as much power as she could divert, using the new angled configuration against the guns they used on her. Two dumb fire missiles shot out and struck her head on, but she couldn't move or they would hit Jacobs.

"Shields are dropping quick! All fighters on the E-band, need immediate assistance coordinates nine nine two tap four eight one tap two two three" Elena started calling out as she fired at the tugs. She had two down before her shields started to fail from the huge onslaught of rounds she was taking.

Roberts and Sarah sailed over an asteroid nearby right then with Merricks hot on their tail, as John and Linda shot through the same opening Jacobs had come out of and fired all of their decoys and flares they had on their booster frames. Roberts and Sarah opened up with their gauss cannons on the last two tugs and Merricks sprayed at the turrets.

"Colonel! Are you ok?" Roberts asked.

"Minor hull damage, I have a breach on the second engine, closing it off. To hell with me! Check on Jacobs now!" she growled with a large hint of worry. John and Linda floated over to Jacob's fighter. His cockpit was dented and damaged, sparks coming from some of the outside hexagonal cameras, and his left engine was almost on fire. There were bullet holes riddling the outside armor paneling and one of the gauss cannons was bent out of shape. Half of his right wing was gone.

"I need an emergency transport over here now!" Elena barked over the coms.

"Copy, Hotel 2-2-1 coming to pick up" she heard. Hotel 2-2-1 was a medical transport that was directly linked to her wing.

"Raven Vulture 3-1-1 coming for escort." They all saw a lumbering gunship move over the top of the asteroid, its twin GUA-23 Linkless autocannons at the ready. Jacobs was still not responding.

"Who the fuck fired those and didn't get a damned lock?" Elena growled over the coms.

**\*\*[Five hours later]\*\***

Elena sat next to Jacobs's medical bed as he lay unmoving with a breathing mask over his face. He had two IVs stuck into his arm, and he had recently gone through surgery. A round had managed to punch through the cockpit and penetrate his suit, smashing right through his lower rib cage and coming out the other end. The suit had sealed against vacuum quickly, but he was barely alive when the medical transport got to him.

She was reading a data pad with video footage around that area, looking for all clues as to what happened. He would have been fine if he wasn't hit by the missiles before. She knew he could have easily gotten away from the ambush if he wasn't attacked by a friendly. She simply had to find out who it was.

"Cherry, I need you to do me a favor. Would you tell Petty Officer Kelly to come to the medical ward immediately please?" she said just as she saw the raw footage of Ash G-099's booster frame. Ash was assigned to be the partner to Kelly for the battle, and had video of her heading after those two tugs and firing her missiles. Elena was livid. The Spartan had just gotten through being so proud of her top notch abilities only to produce friendly fire on someone. That someone was one of her pilots.

"How is he doing" Dr. Wright said as he walked through the glass door into the recovery room. Admiral Hood was right behind him.

"Sir" she saluted quickly and he saluted back.

"At ease. He's out of surgery. Is he going to be ok?" Hood asked.

"They said he'll be fine now, he just has to take it easy for a bit. I can't believe it. The round punched clean through his liver. They had to clean him out and clone a new one for him. And all of this because a Spartan fired from the hip" Elena growled.

"A Spartan you say? Which one?" Hood asked.

"Petty Officer Second Class Kelly-087. She fired a barrage of missiles down into an asteroid with multiple corridors to catch a tug trying to escape just so she could go after another tug, AFTER all Spartans were called to assist the fleet in repelling boarders. The only reason John and Linda came to assist was cause of my emergency call to them. God damn it!" Elena explained and balled her hands into fists. She was angry, and Hood could relate.

"After all that talk about how good Spartans were, and she produces friendly fire. That just gets me you know?" she said.

"I understand. How was it she attacked Lieutenant Jacobs?" Hood asked. Elena picked up the data pad and handed it to him. He watched as she fired her double missile volley into the corridor while Ash was trying to catch up. He saw something fly across the corridor and the missiles suddenly gained lock and followed it.

"I see. So she didn't bother to get a lock in a very difficult blind area. That was a very poor choice" Hood told her.

"I mean, seriously sir? No more Spartans in space please? At least until they go through some flight competency test for others safety. Let the flying be done by us pilots. I respect them on the ground, we'd have much higher casualty rate from the last battle if they weren't there, but for crying out loud, she just put one of my pilots in the med bay for doing his job" she explained.

"I agree. Spartans only attack threats, and Jacobs was clearly not a threat. He's your pilot Colonel Gripen, how would you like to handle this?" Admiral Hood asked her. Dr. Wright gazed at her. She sighed.

"I was originally livid with her after finding out about this, nowâ€¦" she trailed off just as Kelly walked into the medical bay. She looked over to the glass door and walked in.

"Petty Officer Second Class Spartan-087 reporting as ordered ma'am" she said and saluted. Elena could see the glance towards Jacobs lying on the medical bed.

"Petty Officer, I know what happened out there from video footage. Now, I'm allowing Colonel Gripen to handle your punishment. You were ordered to return to the fleet, and instead you disobeyed that order to go on a personal glory quest to take out two tugs you said were dropping mines. Granted you might have been clearing them out before backing off to assist the fleet. While those mines might have hampered our movement towards Erule, that would not have caused casualties. Colonel?" Hood told Kelly, and then looked at Elena.

Elena looked up at Kelly and could see she looked genuinely sorry. She screwed up, and now a pilot was wounded. Jacobs liked the Spartans. He talked to them whenever they were nearby, which the Spartans found odd. He was quite social to everybody now, and his view of being full of himself had all but evaporated. He now realized making others feel good about themselves made him look good.

Elena just looked at her with disappointment. "Admiral, I do not believe it is in our interest to have Spartans upstairs with us again unless they go through mandatory safety flight courses. She ruined it for the others. While I do not enjoy broadening it across the whole Spartan squad, it will keep things like this from happening. It's for the safety of our pilots. When fighters are not outside, I don't care, but thisâ€¦ this wasn't thinking about others around you. What made you think to fire without a lock?" she asked.

"I was attempting to destroy an enemy threat that could take lives in the future ma'am" Kelly responded.

"What you attempted and what you did are two different things. This is why we pilots save our missiles. Those things are more powerful than gauss cannons or our guns. You fired an entire salvo at the tug when one would have sufficed. Why? Why so overzealous?" Elena asked.

"Some of the missiles would have hit the side of the asteroid ma'am" Kelly said, a slight hint of nervousness in her voice that Elena could detect.

"So wait until you are on the other side or pursue him Petty Officer, we had no idea how many pirate forces they had out there. We're a long way from home with a supply chain that isn't fully up and running yet. And here, right here, it shows you heading after another tug nearby after firing your missiles. You changed targets without checking to see if the first target was hit! Your fire and forget nearly cost a pilot his life! Did you even bother to check your motion trackers? I know for a fucking fact John and Linda's trackers weren't affected by the jamming from the materials in the asteroids. It only affected our sensors, not motion" she said. Kelly looked like she was trying to think of the right words.

"Ma'am, I am deeply regretful of my actions today. I did not intend for Lieutenant Jacobs to fall victim to my attacks. I know I am to still be punished for my actions and will take whatever measures are necessary in my punishment. My attempts obviously failed and it was a grave error in judgment on my part." Kelly stood there waiting for what Elena had in store for her.

"Petty Officer, I don't care if you are a Spartan, I know what you have inside you, I know what you think you're capable of and what we've seen you do. How you fly is completely different than how you fight on the ground. There isn't any cover you can hide behind up here except temporary ones like asteroids or ships, and you are still moving by them. You rely on locks to make sure your missiles and rounds hit the target and not a friendly, cause all of it will keep going out here. You are relying on your booster frame or fighter you are flying, not yourself. All other fighter pilots had adapted during that battle by swapping to guns and using very few explosives. The chance of blowing debris off of asteroids was too great. I don't know what you thought would have happened, but we KNEW what would happen. We didn't have any problems until you fired that salvo."

Kelly looked hurt by her words but continued to try and keep her stone mask showing. Elena just shook her head and sighed, disappointed.

"After all that talk, you're just like any other ground pounder thinking it's the same up here as down there. It's all guts and glory and never realizing just how careful or boring some other jobs are. During the battle of Shaquille I had to stay up top for reasons I can't explain to you while you guys were running around blowing things up. I didn't disobey orders then, and I didn't fire random volleys down below hoping they'd hit something I saw shoot by. You're dismissed Spartan" Elena told her in a soft tired voice.

"Ma'am, I don't know what my punishment is" Kelly said.

"I already told you. Spartans are not allowed outside to assist in dog fighting for the duration of this mission unless a mandatory flight safety course has been taken. It's too dangerous for others without it. You are a loose cannon, one that I don't want near my squadron again until you can change how you respond in a fighter battle as well as your attitude. Dismissed" Elena ordered. Kelly saluted hesitantly and turned on her heel, then walked out of the medical bay.

"You handled that well. Not a very harsh punishment however for friendly fire" Hood said.

"Trust me sir, it's very harsh once the other Spartans find out she's to blame for their being watched like little kids and put through safety courses. Her peers will put her in her place for me. I hate that it is a punishment placed on all the Spartans, as John and Linda were helpful out there, but this has proven just how much experience they have in a fast space combat situation" she told him. Hood smiled.

"That's good leadership. You balanced her punishment well and with thought put into it. Most officers would simply have put her in the brig or court martialed her, or if they wanted to, destroy her career and make her do menial jobs on board. They could have even transferred her to some backwater post somewhere watching a farming colony. I must admit, I didn't expect that Colonel." Hood saluted her and she saluted quickly back, and he nodded to Dr. Wright and walked out of the room.

Jacobs was still asleep from the anesthetics, and Elena just stared at him.

"I hope I did the right thing to make sure this doesn't happen again." Elena took a small box she was given during the surgery and placed it on the table nearby. She opened it and aimed the box so Jacobs would see it when he woke up. Inside was a purple heart medal.

"You just rest and get back to us when you can Lieutenant" she whispered and patted him gently on the shoulder. She then walked out of the medical room.

(Author's Note: Eep, Kelly is a bit wild compared to the other Spartans. She needs to chill out like John. By the way, the VOLCANO system is actually a mine layer in real life, this is just like a MK 20 something version in the future. They are automated mine layers equipped on tanks or choppers to create a random pattern mine field. A friend of mine works on them. I wonder who will cover for Jacobs's position until he's back on his feet? Please review!)

## 15. Spartan Pilot

\*\*[1200 hours, December 15\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Orbiting Erule Colony]\*\*

Elena sat munching on her lunch while Renee seemed to be arguing with John. She wasn't really listening, as it had something to do with marines and Spartans. Buck seemed to be listening keenly as ODS Ts were elite marines. Elena had figured the conversation didn't involve her, so she continued to eat her food.

It had taken two days for the combined fleet to destroy the mine fields placed near the colony, and most of the work was done by Super Vulture IIs, giant gunships with large numbers of missiles and gun turrets. They were slow and cumbersome, but carried a surprising amount of firepower, each taking out a wall of mines on their own. After the mines were destroyed, pelicans transported marines down below, and ODS Ts actually went with them. Their mission was to help wipe out rebel activity in the areas, and it seemed extremely hard to do. Sangheili troops loyal to the Arbiter would join each squad and lead them to whom they knew were on their wanted lists, and then they



would kill that rebel.

Elena had almost nothing to do after the asteroid belt, as most of the fighting involved simply finding rebels hiding. Renee seemed excited as her squad, with the help of four Elite Majors, had already found twelve rebels and "put them to the sword" as the Elites said. The Elites actually felt that Renee was a good luck charm.

"Hey, you seem out of it, you ok?" Buck suddenly asked.

"Me? I'm fine, just thinking. How's it going down below for you guys?" she asked. Buck put his hand up with his palm down and wiggled it, emphasizing it was 50-50.

"That bad huh?" she smirked.

"Renee seems to have gotten the most experienced assistance in the matter. I swear, she's lucky. We got saddled with some minors that don't know their ass from their mouth, they just want to kill stuff to prove themselves" Buck grumbled.

"That does sound problematic. How about you John?" Elena asked.

"Fine" he said simply. She figured he was still annoyed with her for having all Spartans go through safety courses to go out unattended in a fighter now.

"He's just bitchy that you punished all Spartans for one thing Kelly did that's all" Renee giggled.

"I am not bitchy. Ma'am, you could have let Fred handle it" he told her.

"Master Chief, I was given the choice by Admiral Hood. I took it. Fred wasn't offered, I was" she told him.

"We chewed her out for what she did. I don't know why you punished all of us" he responded.

"That's why I did it John. I knew you'd ream her for this. She needs to be taken down a notch by her peers. Now that you went through the safety courses, you're fine again. Nothing to worry about. It wasn't a punishment on your part, it was more of an annoyance. Her on the other hand, she gets to live with the fact she almost crippled a pilot that was friendly to her. That's changed some people's views on the ship of how Spartans treat others. I fixed the problem on all sides. You should be thanking me" Elena told him with smirk.

"She damaged our reputation. She won't do it again, trust me on that" he said.

"I do, more than you know John. I trusted you back during the battle, and I trust you now. Her, I don't know. She's gonna have to work to get out of the hole she dug for herself" she said as she picked up a slice of apple and bit a piece off.

"Are we allowed near your squadron oh gracious Colonel?" he said with a smirk.

"You are, and the other Spartans too. Again, she hasn't gained my trust back yet. By the way, who are the Spartans in dark blue armor I saw heading down from the \_Infinity\_?" she asked. John looked at Fred sitting next to him, who shrugged.

"You saw Spartans leave that ship? They aren't part of our group ma'am. We never saw them" Fred told her. Elena looked surprised.

"You mean they aren't Spartan IIs or IIIs?" she asked.

"They might be Spartan IIIs, but we haven't seen them. You would have a talk to Tom and Lucy" John told her. She cocked an eyebrow.

"Wouldn't what's her face know? Dr. Halsey?" she asked. Fred and John looked at each other, and then looked to Linda.

"We haven't seen her in quite some time ma'am. Last we saw she was talking to Parangosky" Fred told her.

"Wait, the head of ONI? That doesn't sound very good. How long ago was this?" she asked.

"When we left Earth" he replied. She blinked and looked at her food, then blinked again and sighed. One of the best minds of the 26th century had just disappeared. Hopefully Dr. Wright could fill in somehow, though he didn't work for ONI. Elena thought for a moment. She actually didn't know who Dr. Wright worked for.

"Holy shitâ€¦| Elena, look left now" Buck said as everyone looked. Standing in the doorway of the DFAC was a tall muscular man, looking to be in his early twenties and fairly hansom. Everything about him screamed Spartan. His black hair was shorn close with the front greased back in a tip, looking like a wave. He had piercing blue eyes, like hers.

"I don't remember him being in the Spartan roster" Elena whispered.

"He isn't, at least not with us. You really need to talk with Tom and Lucy now" Fred said seriously. The man looked around the room and spotted Elena staring at him. He smiled and walked up to her.

"Colonel Gripen I presume?" he asked.

"Um, yes, and you are?" she asked quizzically.

"I'm Commander Aldric-4-102. I've been offered the chance to take up a position in your wing" he said and crisply saluted her.

"Uhâ€¦| at ease. Look, I don't know what you were told but I have a pilot who is simply recovering from wounds and should be back in a week or so" she told him with a confused look on her face.

"I know. I'm still up for transfer ma'am. I know we'd work great together" he said and stared into her eyes. Renee caught the look he was giving her and looked at John.

"Umâ€¦ I thought Spartans were ground forces and when applicable assisted in aerial assaults" she tested him, poking for information.

"Some Spartans have been provided full flight training, showing more control in the sky. I've been told I excel beyond anything other Spartans can do up here" he said and glanced quickly towards John, Fred and Linda. If they were offended, they didn't show it.

"Well, um, have a talk with my Lieutenant Colonel, and-" she tried to explain how to apply to her wing.

"I've already had the pleasure of talking with him ma'am. He said he'll get the paperwork done if you accept. I can do any test you require of me to prove my capability" he told her. Buck and Renee looked between the two quickly. He was leaning against the table and was maybe two feet from her face.

"Well, I'd have a trial run but there isn't much to do right now for us pilots so-" she tried to say but he interrupted quickly again.

"Actually I was given a mission you may be interested in. It involves your fighters, which I have been trained in as well. You and I could perform it easily in a few hours, it only requires intel gathering" he said. Elena glanced at her friends quickly, wondering what they were thinking.

"Alright, send the mission brief to my data pad and we'll take it from there" she told him.

"Already done ma'am" he said and pushed her data pad in front of her. She didn't even have to read it. She accessed the information in her eye HUD and read the details. Fly over a city confirmed to have rebel activity and listen in with expansion sensors on the outside of the fighters, then follow a group of rebels in transports away from the area. Once the landing point is found, send all information back to the ship and leave the area unnoticed.

Fred gave a glance to Linda, and she nodded slightly while drinking her tea, and no words were spoken.

"Wonderful. I hope to see the Ghost herself show me a thing or two out there. I'll see you in the hangar tomorrow morning ma'am" he said and she could almost see his right eyelid wink at her. Was he flirting with her? He got up and walked out of the door, without another word to anyone else.

"Ok, Spartan 4-102? What theâ€¦ I so have to talk with Tom and Lucy now" Elena said. Fred agreed. She looked around and saw Tom with Lucy as if on cue standing in the food line getting their lunch.

"Tom!" she yelled and waved for him to come over. They finished gathering their food and walked to her table.

"Something wrong ma'am?" he asked.

"I can't tell. I need to ask you both something, and don't pull that silent thing with me Lucy. I need to pick your brains. Do you know an Aldric 4-102?" she asked. Lucy and Tom looked at each other and shook

their heads.

"No ma'am, that doesn't sound like a company of Spartan IIIs. A Spartan II maybe?" Tom asked.

"Not one of us kid" Fred told him.

"No wayâ€¦ could he be aâ€¦ could he be a Spartan 4?" Buck asked.

"That's a scary thought" Lucy said as she chewed on some grapes.

"Are you guys absolutely positive?" Elena asked, her serious face on. Lucy nodded and Tom agreed.

"Guess I need to talk to Dr. Wright then. Please excuse me you guys, have a good lunch" she said and got up and took her tray to the trash. She walked out with her data pad and down the hall, then into the lift. Elena sat there for a minute before the doors opened and she briskly walked to the bridge where she expected Dr. Wright to be.

"Ah, come to say hello my dear?" he said as he turned around after looking over a communications panel with an officer sitting in the chair.

"Can I have a word with you in private Daveth? It's important" she said. He looked around and then looked at her.

"Err, is something wrong my dear?" he asked.

"I don't know. I need to ask you some questions" she told him. He nodded and walked out the bridge door with her.

"What do you know about Spartan 4s?" she asked.

"You aren't one, if that's what you're asking. The augments were specially designed for flight in mind, not for ground combat. Why?" he asked.

"I think I just met one who is being transferred to my wing" she told him. He blinked.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure. Aldric 4-102? Ring any bells?" she asked.

"Let me look at the roster" he said and pulled out his data pad. He checked any new arrivals.

"Ah, hereâ€¦ mmm, it states Spartan, but of unknown modelâ€¦ normally it would be clear if he was a II or a III. That'sâ€¦ did they start a new program already?" he asked.

"I'm asking you that one Daveth. I have no idea. You wouldn't per chance know what augments they have, whether they're an improvement or not over the others?" she asked.

"Hmmmâ€¦ let me get in touch with a friend in ONI and I'll get back

to you on that one. Mmmm, meet me in the observation room in two hours" he told her and left.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Elena sat staring out the window in the observation room. She didn't know what to make of Aldric. She normally was given the profiles by her subordinates and then accepted or declined from information gathered. This was something entirely new. She had no knowledge of Aldric in any way shape or form. He was an enigma, a very handsome enigma, but an enigma nonetheless, and that worried her.

For all intents, he could be a spy for ONI keeping an eye on her.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting my dear" Dr. Wright said as he entered the room.

"It's no problem. Any luck?" she asked.

"Well, from what I could gather, the same enhancements as the Spartan IIs, with some other enhancements to further make him resistant to damage. There seems to be some form of organic Kevlar implanted under his skin, as well as some form of modification to his spine to allow a better connection to pilot craft. He gets inside his suit, and it connects him to the craft, in which he uses his legs to work spare controls. His hand and eye coordination seem to be improved as well. Aside from that, nothing different" he told her.

"So he can do what I do?" she asked.

"Absolutely not. You can literally control your fighter with your mind if you wanted to my dear, your modified neural lace and cortex scanner allow for far quicker reaction than he can, regardless of what he has. He also does not have your ocular implants. That technology for your augments is classified beyond anything ONI knows about" he told her.

"Classified to whom?" she asked.

"A Government beneficiary that provides funding for the Air Force special projects. I would rather not name them as they would like to stay anonymous as you would understand for any company. To be connected to the military could hamper the public's view of them." Elena narrowed her eyes slightly then nodded, but she knew Dr. Wright was hiding something.

"Is there anything else in his file?" she asked.

"He wasn't a child turned soldier if you're asking about that my dear. Eighteen years old he volunteered for the project, beyond that classified for the project. Oh, he did take dancing lessons it looks, that seems interesting. I didn't know that. Hmmm, must have missed that spot. Mmmm, his medical files show nothing odd, and he's apparently been a model soldier up until now. Favorite food is New York Cheese Cake" he told her.

"Up until he hit on me in the DFAC" she told him.

"He hit on you Elena?" he asked matter of factly.

"Well, the signals were clear at least. He's a nice guy from what I could see, but still, he's in my wing and I'm his commanding officer. It's improper for him to do that" she told him.

"I would agree with you except technically he would be loaned to your wing. A Spartan belongs to ONI my dear, not the Air Force. Cross transfers are very rare, and only for elite forces who have been trained to work with the opposite branch. So him fraternizing with you wouldn't exactly be frowned upon" he told her grinning.

"I frown upon it! Look, I know he's cute, and he's ripped, but I'm going to be a married woman eventually to a man I love on Earth! Hell, I'll probably have kids with him when this is all done. Nothing will happen with this Aldric" she told him.

"You know my dear, I support you in all that you do, and you know you can trust me, however, I do believe the one thing you cannot trust is your own heart. The heart changes from one moment to the next. For all you know, this man on Earth, Andy, may not be the one for you" he told her.

"And you think this Spartan is?" she gawked.

"I did not say that my dear, I'm simply saying it's difficult for you to say that Andy is your soul mate. I know you have known him for a long time, and he was your high school sweetheart, but things do change throughout people's lives. For all you know, this Aldric is the wrong one for you, and you simply set him in his place. You may find someone else beyond either of them. I'm just trying to tell you your emotions can change out here" he said and took her hand and patted it softly.

"I made a promise a long time ago that I'd come home to Andy, and he promised me he'd wait for me. I pinkie swore to himâ€¦ I never break those promises" she said frowning.

"What you decide is up to you my dear, I cannot make the choice for you. Keep it professional, or you may start a fling with him, regardless no one will care beyond you and him, and maybe Andy. Well, I should get back to the bridge, I'd like to see what Captain Dare has been so worked up about" he said and nodded to her and walked away.

\*\*[0800 hours, December 16\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Erule Colony]\*\*

Elena walked into the hangar to almost bump into Aldric.

"Ah, there you are Elena. Um, I heard you let your other pilots call you by your name and not by rank. May I do the same?" he asked.

"Um, well, ok. Yeah, sure" she said and nodded. He smiled that disarming smile he used before towards her and she couldn't help but smile back, then put her helmet on and he did the same. He was wearing a suit of MJOLNIR armor with some oddly modified plug slots running along the spine. He walked to his Black Blade, which was Jacobs's fighter repaired, and got inside. She shook her head slightly.

\_What the fuck am I doing? I am not flirting with that guy\_ she thought as she climbed into her cockpit and closed the SEEKER door down.

"Coms check. Elena, are you there?" he asked.

"I'm here" she replied and did her preflight check.

"Ah, your voice sounds much nicer over the coms than previous commanding officers. They're normally yelling or have a hoarse voice. So nice to hear yours" he said. She didn't respond, just blinked and slowed on her preflight.

\_Stop flirting dickhead! And you! Stop receiving! You love Andy!\_ She thought as she finished her preflight.

"CIC, this is Raven 1-1 ready for lock and load" she said over the coms.

"CIC, this is Raven 4-1 ready as well for lock and load" Aldric said over the coms.

"Understood Ravens, locking you into place" CIC responded and they felt their fighters move onto the mag rails.

"Almost feels like the waltz when they do that" he said.

"Or a slide" she responded, then realized what she said.

"Oh, so you know how to dance? What do you do?" he asked.

"Salsa and Flamenco mostly, with some classical every so once in a while" she told him.

\_Stop giving him fuel for the fire!\_ She thought and shook her head again.

"Ah, do you still practice? I sometimes get caught dancing in the gym to do my exercises. It gets old without a partner" he chuckled.

"Sometimes, during the night I will. No one is around to see me doing the moves. Salsa tends to be a bit seductive" she told him.

"I'd very much enjoy the honor of watching you dance Elena, if you'd allow me to. Maybe, I could be your partner one of those times?" he asked.

\_Shut up! Shut up shut up shut up! He's probably some serial killer in disguise or has a micro dick or something wrong with him! You love Andy! Stop flirting back!\_ She thought and groaned softly.

"Is something wrong? Are you alright Elena?" he asked.

"Wha, no, nothing is wrong. I'm just thinking about some things. Alright, we're locked and ready, launching" she said as the rails fired her off into the black void with Aldric hot on her tail. He took a position just above her and behind, watching her back.

\_Protective isn't he?\_

She flew towards the atmosphere and descended quickly, with him barely noticeable. He was much better at keeping formation than her squadron. Even Roberts still kept a slight distance in case she moved quickly in a new vector.

"Activating photo cell paneling and active camo" she said and dipped off the radar suddenly.

"Dido" he said and followed suit. They flew silently towards the city and slowly circled the area, listening to different chatter below.

"I have weapon IDs registering" he told her.

"What? What weapon IDs? UNSC issue?" she asked.

"Yes, there were ID markers placed into the handles of some firearms to see where they were moving throughout Covenant space, to see who traded in them. There were also some plasma weapons too with ID chips embedded. I'm picking them up" he told her. She blinked in confusion and checked her sensors. She suddenly realized the small blips she was seeing were not in fact UNSC ground forces, but the weapon IDs showing up.

"Sheesh, how did I miss thatâ€|" she grumbled.

"You weren't told about them I guess. Well now you know Elena. There, right there, a transport is starting to hover. The markers seem to be congregating near it and in it. We should follow it when you're ready" he said, almost waiting on her to make the first move.

She tracked it from behind at a leisurely pace, watching as it flew into the mountains.

"We just lost the signal, something inside the mountains must be interfering. What could it be?" she asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine. We should get some more information before we attempt anything wouldn't you agree?" he asked.

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Conundrum this is Raven 1-1, we've found where the transport has landed but we've lost all signal once it hit the deck. Please advise" she said.

"Colonel. You aren't going to believe this. That transport is being remote controlled" Veronica said over the coms. Elena didn't find it surprising.

"Well, our pelicans can do that Captain, so I don't doubt their transports could do it as well" she replied.

"No, I don't think you understand. The signal you were tracking, we cross coded it. It's UNSC issue" Veronica told her. Elena gasped.

"We're still trying to track where the original signal is coming from, but it seems there are multiple other signals from other transports, and we picked up a similar signal from Shaquille. Someone



is controlling these things from somewhere. We just have to back trace it" Dare told them.

"What do you advise ma'am?" Aldric asked.

"Land and get a visual on the landing site, once you do, mark it with a beacon and leave. Do not engage, get back in the air and get back here" she said.

"Did she just say to land in a hostile territory?" Elena asked.

"Don't worry Elena, I won't let anything happen to you. It will be easy" he said softly. Somehow, she believed him. They landed quickly and silently with no one noticing them and they both got out. She jumped to the ground and locked the cockpit, then ran to a tree. Aldric was right behind her with a rifle. They softly crept towards the landing site to see at least twenty Sangheili rebels and brutes unpacking it.

"There's the transport" Aldric said as Elena slipped silently to a rock outcropping. She dug into her small pack she was carrying and pulled out a signal beacon. She then pushed the activation button and pushed the beacon under a small rock to hide it from view.

"Alright, they're lit up" she whispered and he gave a thumbs up, his armor no longer dark blue, but now a camouflage color to blend with the surroundings. She couldn't tell if it was the photo cell paneling or if the armor simply changed to different patterns depending on his choice. They snuck back to their fighter only to find two Sangheili rebels looking over the fighters.

"Shit! ok, we have to figure a way to get rid of them" she said and suddenly Aldric wasn't there next to her. One of the rebels looked and noticed Elena hiding behind a tree and ran towards her.

"Oh fuck!" she said and pulled her pistol to defend herself. Aldric suddenly turned off his active camouflage and slit the rebel's throat, then threw his knife straight into the second rebel's head, embedding the blade straight into his skull. Both slid to the ground slowly.

"I told you I wouldn't let anything happen to you" he said softly and gave her a Spartan smile on his visor. She chuckled and opened her cockpit as he picked up his combat knife and cleaned it quickly.

"Here, lemme help you up" he said and cupped his hands together for her to get a step up.

"Thanks" she replied.

"Gotta be a gentleman to a lady" he said. She stopped halfway into the cockpit and looked over her shoulder.

"I'm not a lady until I'm groundside on Earth and out of a flight suit" she chuckled.

"I could not believe that for even a second. You're always a lady, though you carry yourself beyond that" he chuckled and leapt up to

his own cockpit.

"Flattery will get you nowhere Aldric" she grinned under her helmet and started her engines up.

"Not flattery. Truth, I'm simply saying it how it is" he replied.

She shook her head and JTOL'd into the air, and then flew straight up. Aldric followed quickly. They both shot through the atmosphere and towards the Conundrum. They both landed and got out of their fighters and headed to the changing room. Elena was about to change when she saw him taking his armor off with the help of technicians and a rotating robotic arm disassembling the armor. He wasn't wearing anything underneath. She suddenly turned around quickly.

Fuck! He's not a micro dick! Uh oh, do not look again! She could almost feel herself blushing then quickly tried to compose herself.

"Ma'am? Do you need help with your suit as well?" One technician asked and she turned around. Aldric was already putting his underwear on and a t-shirt that was still too small for his rippling muscles.

What? No, I'm fine. I can take it off myself thank you. Dismissed" she replied and they nodded and left. Aldric put the rest of his clothes on as she slipped around a locker level and took her clothes with her.

"Is something wrong Elena?" he asked over the top of the lockers.

"Don't look! I'm changing" she suddenly said.

"Ah, I see. You know you shouldn't be embarrassed about your body" he said and chuckled.

"I'm not embarrassed about it, I just don't feel comfortable with others seeing me naked that's all" she said.

"Ah, modesty does you credit fair damsel, for what man would have the honor to see thy fair skin uncovered by threads unfit for one of your stature" he said, starting to speak in grandiose language. Elena didn't respond.

"Ah, my apologies, I did not mean to make you uncomfortable. I tend to enjoy reading old books and the writing, it tends to stick in your head. Shakespeare in particular. He was somewhat of a nut job, but he made good plays" he chuckled.

"No, no apologies necessary" she said as she finished taking her suit off and putting her underwear on. Her engagement ring slid off her finger and rolled along the ground. Aldric bent to pick it up and she covered herself with a towel.

"Sorry, I just thought to pick it up" he said with another disarming smile. He handed it back to her and she slid it back on her finger.

"It's a beautiful ring for a beautiful woman. Must be one hell of a lucky guy" he said.

"He is. Um, I still need to finish putting my clothes on" she said and made a twirl with her finger telling him to turn around. He smirked and did as instructed, and she put the towel down and pulled her shirt on, then her pants and finally her uniform top. She then put her shoes on and closed her locker.

"Alright, done" she said.

"Good to hear" he replied.

"You know, you don't have to wait around for me. You could have gone off to eat or something" she told him.

"And leave my commander unescorted to the DFAC? What if you happened to faint from lack of nutrition?" he said in mock worry. She didn't look amused.

"I'm stronger than I look" she said and crossed her arms over her chest and smirked.

"Of that I have no doubt Ms. Gripen. Of that I have no doubt" he chuckled.

"Commander Spartan 4-102 report to the bridge please" Cherry said over the coms.

"Ah, I guess the escort will be cut quite short. Um, about the dancing however, would you still be interested?" he asked her.

\_Say no! Say NO! SAY NO!\_ she thought.

"Well, I guess, do you know how to do the same dancing I do though?" she asked. He took her hand and suddenly twirled her around, then took her in a dip.

"I believe I can accommodate" he said smiling. He let her back up and she blinked quickly.

"Alright, I guess we could do some dance exercises tomorrow" she answered.

\_YOU IDIOT!\_ \_Mayday Mayday we're going down!\_ Her brain was telling her. She was already kicking herself for accepting the invitation.

"Great to hear. I'll see you tomorrow then, if I don't see you later today of course" he smiled and walked out of the hangar. She looked around the room but realized no one had seen the scene she just partook in and pushed her hair back.

"Oh I have to talk to Andy right now" she suddenly whispered to herself and walked straight out of the hangar changing room and right to the lift. She walked out and to her quarters. She immediately sent a call response through the terminal. With advances in communication technology from forerunner tech they had researched, the UNSC was now able to send almost instant calls to anywhere in their corner of the galaxy.

"Wha? Who is it?" Andy replied groggily over the video call. She had forgotten about the time difference.

"Oh I'm sorry honey, did I wake you?" she asked, feeling bad that she didn't recognize what time it was.

"Elena? Oh, well, yeah, but it's always good to hear your voice. How are you doing sweetheart?" he asked and smiled goofily into the camera.

"I'm doing a lot better now that I can see your face. How are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm doing ok. We ran drills for something yesterday, don't know what it was. No fires. Pretty easy going week. I've been getting some info about my station. Don't know much about it, but they may need us outside of Earth for fire assistance. I'm pretty sure it's just to the moon or something though" he said and chuckled.

"Oh, well I hope everything stays ok over there" she said and smiled.

"I hope so too. I hope the same for you Elena. I love you" he said.

"I love you too Andy. I won't keep you, I just needed to hear your voice. Go back to sleep, I'll talk to you later" she said and brought her fingers to her lips and kissed them, then pushed them to the camera.

He reached through the air and brought his own hands to his lips.

"Good night" she said softly to him.

"Good night hon" he replied and they both turned off the call camera. She sighed and shook her head.

\_Don't fuck him over. You can't do that to him. You love him. Aldric is nothing. He might have muscles and those blue eyes and muscles wait you already thought about that and he's endowed Andy is endowed too!... isn't he?\_ Elena thought. She had never actually bothered to peek at Andy changing. He had seen her once in the nude before she covered up, but she had never seen him undress before. They nearly had the chance after the prom.

\_Jesus, how long ago was that? Almost six years ago? I've been keeping him waiting that long?\_ She thought. She wondered if it was cruel of her to string Andy along. He was waiting for her to come back. She was holding his life back, waiting for her to return so they could continue their lives together. Was it right for her to be doing that to him?

\_I wonder if I'm hurting him I have this career as a pilot and he's just in San Francisco where we grew up god Andy, I miss you... where are you to set me straight if you were here I wouldn't even give Aldric a second thought.\_

\*\*[1900 hours, December 16\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Erule

Colony]\*\*

Elena was invited to the entertainment room. Apparently one of the marines is related to a director in Hollywood and was able to get an early viewing of a movie not coming out for at least six months. No one understood how he got it, but Elena was one of the few who they asked to come along and get a seat on the couch. Buck sat with Veronica watching from a leather chair and Renee and John were in another chair. Jones sat with his back against the bottom of the couch as Elena sat in the corner of it.

Aldric walked in and smiled as everyone noticed him.

"Has it started?" he asked.

"Nah man, you just got here on time" Dutch said and handed him a bucket of popcorn. There were dozens of them, one for each person. Aldric sat down next to Elena as Jones was pressed against the armrest next to her. Unfortunately for her, it was a horror movie.

"Greatâ€¦ I hate theseâ€¦ I'll just go to bed early guys" she said and started to get up. Everybody started talking quickly and booing.

"Oh come on missy, sit with us, it's just a movie, it isn't real" Buck said scrunching his face up.

"I just don't like the adrenaline spikes. You don't sleep well when you see these things. Gives you nightmares" she said.

"You? Nightmares? Hell, the things in the movie would have to be afraid of you Ghost. You're nasty with that fighter of yours" Jones chuckled.

"You don't get to control what happens in your dreams Mark" she retorted.

"You can only hope they're filled with things you enjoy and love" Aldric responded suddenly. Elena didn't have anything to say after that. She just did her best to not blush as the movie turned on and the lights went out.

They watched the movie for the better part of two hours, and each time there was some scary scene, Elena would almost jump out of her seat. Jones kept patting her on the knee telling it was ok, and Aldric actually took her hand in his to calm her down.

"Alright kids, shows over, stop making out in the corners" Mickey said as he turned on the lights. Surprisingly, Elena and Aldric were not doing anything odd, but Buck and Veronica were pushing the leather chair backwards.

"Oh Eddy! Get a room! Sheesh!" Elena laughed and everyone chuckled.

"Huh? What? Movie's over?" he asked sheepishly and was suddenly pushed to the floor by Veronica who was regaining her composure.

"Well then, ahem, we'll be going then" she said as she straightened her uniform and Buck got back onto his feet while rubbing his neck. She walked out of the room and down the hall with him in tow.

"I think that's the sign for all of us to get some sleep. Another day at the office right?" Elena said. Everyone agreed.

"Would you be willing to give me permission to escort you to your quarters Elena?" Aldric whispered.

"Umâ€¦ well, ok. I guess" she said furrowing her eyebrows. He smiled at her as they both walked out of the room and to the lifts. They walked in silence for most of the time, and when she finally got to her door, she turned around.

"Um, thank you for escorting me here" she said.

"It was my pleasure. We're still on for the dancing tomorrow yes?" he asked.

"Yeah. That shouldn't be a problem" she said and a small smile crept onto her face. She instinctively pushed her hair behind her ear.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning then Elena. Sweet dreams" he said softly and broke eye contact regretfully as she opened her door and walked in. The door closed behind her.

"Elena, you are a moron" she said to herself. She was leading him on and she didn't mean to.

"After dancing, I'm going to have to tell him straight, he's a nice guy, with a nice body, but my heart belongs to someone else. Yesâ€¦ this will work. I just have to stand firm. I'm a Colonel. I can chew out a Spartan, I can certainly tell one that I don't have feelings for them. Right. Tomorrow. After the dancing" she told herself and got ready for bed.

\*\*[0600 hours, December 17\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Leaving orbit of Erule Colony]\*\*

Elena walked into the gym wearing her gym pants and t-shirt. Aldric was already waiting.

"Sorry I'm not wearing a dress for this, but this is gonna have to do" she told him.

"A dress would only accentuate your already stunning features Elena" he said putting his arms out in praise of her looks.

"Oh now that's just rubbish and you know it" she smirked.

"I would not lie about something of that nature. Now, shall we begin? What shall we do? Salsa you said?" he asked.

"Yes, that's how I dance" she told him.

"Alright, I think I have one in the player" he said and turned on Bamboleo. He took her hand and lead her around the gym floor, twirling her a bit and rocking her back and forth, his hands gentle

on her hips. She broke off as he did a few dance steps, before taking her hand again as she did her own dance moves.

"You're very good" he said in her ear as he dipped her quickly then brought her up, she shaking her chest slightly then flipping around.

"I did it for five years" she told him. He looked genuinely surprised.

"You're definitely a pro. I'm having difficulty keeping up with you" he said as he lifted her from the ground as she did an air split, then slid her down using his body as a pole. She rolled around him and pressed her back to his as they both danced, then he flipped and put his hands on her hips again. Renee happened to walk in with John right as she twirled and he brought her leg up to his hip and bent her backwards, his face down towards her chest, as he lifted her back up and dipped her a second and final time. The music stopped just as she pulled up and cupped his jaw with her hand, looking into his eyes. Renee, John, and now Buck all clapped at the door.

"Nice moves!" Renee said giggling. Elena broke from Aldric quickly and blushed, pushing away from his face and his stone hard chest.

"Umâ€¦ how long have you guys been standing there?" she asked.

"Not long, we saw the last few steps. You never told me you danced" Renee said smiling.

"She took five years of salsa when she was younger. I myself took ballet back then" Aldric explained.

"You did ballet?" Elena asked.

"Never expected it from a Spartan did you?" he said smiling. She chuckled and she noticed he still had his arm wrapped around her hips. She hadn't minded until she became conscious of it. She made her way to Buck who was laughing.

"Oh, that'sâ€¦ oh, you're serious. You do ballet?" he suddenly asked as Elena stood in front of him glaring.

"Yes, he does, and he's very good at it. We just had our workout for the day Buck, and we had fun doing it instead of stressing our bodies. I bet Veronica would love to dance with a guy who knew ballet" she quipped. Buck laughed again then it died quick as he thought about it.

"Maybe Iâ€¦ wait, what am I saying? I'm a Hell Jumper! No way I'm prancing about in a too too missy" he said and put his foot down.

"Fine, she might like learning a few moves from Aldric. What do you say Spartan? Interested in teaching someone how to balance?" she asked.

"In all honesty I would rather dance with you Elena, but I would be willing to help the Captain gain a better form of exercise and get some enjoyment out of the dancing at the same time" he said

smirking.

"Colonel Gripen to the bridge" they heard over the intercom. Elena sighed and thanked Aldric for the dance.

"No need to thank me, I should thank you. I got a dance partner that was beautiful and skilled. I can only hope we can dance again, hopefully tomorrow" he said smiling. She did her best to not blush, but she nodded.

"I should go get a shower. I'll see you guys later" she said and waved to Renee and the others. They waved back and she left quickly and ran to the lift. She shot into her quarters and took a shower as fast as she could, then dried her hair and put her clothes on. She then ran to the bridge.

"We think we've found something you might be interested in" Veronica told her.

"What's up?" Elena asked. Dare looked at Dr. Wright as he glanced at her.

"You aren't going to believe this, but we traced that UNSC signal. It's coming from a very large asteroid much further out. And you'd be amazed at the access codes in use" she said softly.

"What? Who's access codes?" Elena asked.

"You're father's" Dare told her. Elena was stunned.

(Author's Note: Wow, only 7k words this time. I feel wimpy. But I did make chapters that had over 13k so I think I've balanced some things out. I know this is a short one, but I couldn't resist a cliff hanger. So someone has their eye on Elena now besides Andy. Love triangle! Grrr, grrr, testosterone! Must prove Andy is better than Aldric! Or maybe the other way around! I don't know just yet! And Her father has been found! Gasp! But is he alive? The access codes were used, but that could mean anything. Oh and Lucy does talk now. Just read Halo: Glasslands and she actually does find a way to tell things. I don't want to spoil it for others beyond that. Please review!)

## 16. Daring Rescue

"You can't be serious, from the asteroid?" Elena asked, astonished. Her heart was beating rapidly.

"Yes. We're working on a plan of action. Weâ€|" Dare said and then looked at everyone around them, then motioned for Elena to walk out of the bridge as Dr. Wright followed. Admiral Hood had just exited the lift heading towards them.

"Ah, Admiral sir, we were just about to call you" Captain Dare said and both the ladies saluted him. He saluted back and they all stood at ease.

"Captain Dare has told me the situation. From what the ONI intelligence agents have been able to gather Colonel, the audio logs on the black box were in fact corrupted logs of your father being



abducted, and by insurgents. However what was puzzling was the fact there was both Sangheili speech recognized and human voices. We have reason to believe they were working together" Hood told Elena.

\_My father was kidnapped by insurgents? Did they sell him to the rebels?\_ She thought.

"While we don't know why they gave him over to the Sangheili rebels, we believe the most reasonable solution is they hold him captive while he flies transports remotely for them. This allows them to cover more ground quickly with supplies and little chance of what few troops they have being captured or killed by an attack. The beacon you dropped off on the ground was detecting in fact an underground shrine. They've been hiding supplies in different places for months now." Hood took off his cap and scratched his head.

"From what we can tell the asteroid is extremely reinforced and was pulled out of its orbit from the asteroid belt. They most likely store hundreds of transports of all sizes inside, and have him control them. We don't know if there are other pilots being used in the same manner, though it could be assumed. When one of them is resting, another would be put to work, continuously allowing them to spread their influence so quickly" Hood explained.

"So, what are we going to do? When do we strike?" Elena asked. Hood cocked an eyebrow towards her.

"We're building a team to go in right now Colonel, we don't know what to expect inside of the asteroid. It could be heavily guarded, and we don't know the layout" he told her.

"I'd like to be sent out for it" she asked.

"Colonel, while I know he is your father, I believe it is far more reasonable to have you sit this one out" Admiral Hood told her. Elena glared.

"I need to go Admiral, I need to do whatever I can to get him back. I can't sit around and wait for others to save him" she almost growled, then thought better of it and sighed.

"Colonel Gripen, I know what you're thinking. It's irrational and of poor judgment. You aren't a ground operative, you're a pilot. I doubt there will be much fighting outside of the asteroid. There will be no point in you going out there" he told her sternly. She moved to speak, then stopped, and felt defeated.

"What we need is a stealth insertion. We have a modified pelican designed with photo cell panels and active camouflage that was built for these kinds of things. The team will enter the asteroid and scout the area. Once they have a layout, they will find Lieutenant Jack Gripen and evacuate him to the pelican and then to safety." Elena felt left out. How could she not do something? He was her father, she had to try. Hood sighed as she looked at the floor.

"Look, the pelican may require some escort back to the ship once they have been able to escape; you can follow it in and then out. If anything detects it, you can assist, but nothing else is that clear? We don't know how many turrets outside of that asteroid will pop out" he told her.

"Yes sir. Thank you sir" she said and saluted him.

"Now I have to go talk with Captain Dare involving the team roster" he said and nodded to her. Elena breathed deep and looked at Dr. Wright. He smiled towards her and then followed Hood and Veronica into a briefing room. Elena stood there alone in the hallway, thinking.

She finally reacted and walked to her quarters. She sat down on her bed and then fell back, lying down. She just stared at the ceiling for the next hour, wondering if her father was ok. Was he malnourished? Did they beat him? Did he need medical treatment? He'd been gone for over five years, she had no idea what had happened to him.

Her door alarm rang and she sat up. She then walked to the door and checked the camera. Buck and John were both standing there. She opened the door.

"Heard it through the grapevine. We volunteered as soon as we found out. We'll get him out Elena, I promise you that" Buck told her. She looked so grateful. She hugged him and he returned the hug back.

"The pelican is being extended with a troop attachment. Eight Spartans and fifteen ODSTs will be going. There will be four combat medics as well. We're also bringing two ARGUS drones and one of the new HAMMER drones your friend made. We'll get him out Elena, no worries" Buck said into her ear as she rubbed her back soothingly.

Elena pulled back and looked at John. Eight Spartans were going. John, Linda, Fred, Kelly, Ash, Tom, Lucy and Aldric were all going to be suited up and plowing into the asteroid. Buck's ODST team and two others were going along as well. She hoped they tore the place apart for taking her father from her.

\*\*[0100 hours, December 17\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Near Asteroid B66-29-E]\*\*

Elena was flying silent. The pelican, code named "Thorn" slipped in next to her, and she was absolutely amazed at who was piloting it. Jones had learned to fly the thing. He specifically volunteered for the action, and was willing to charge in with the Spartans and ODSTs himself to save her father.

"Raven 1-1, this is Thorn, we think we found an access hatch. Gonna lock into it. Cortana, you have the decryption access?" Jones said over the coms.

"I believe it shouldn't be a problem. Their security buffers are almost non-existent. They have one clumsy AI trying to keep me out, don't think he'll last very long. Cage open, fly in" Cortana responded over the coms. Elena liked Cortana quite a bit. She was spunky and took care of the people she was with, and was fiercely loyal to them, especially John.

"Alright, we're in. Locking down, dampers are out, we're on the deck. Pile out" Jones said as the ODSTs and Spartans spilled out of the

pelican, with two silent black ARGUS drones floating over head as the HAMMER drone rolled out. Twin Vulcans were attached to its sides with heavy armor plating that could extend to provide mobile shields for the troops to hide behind. A Scatter Pack missile launcher was attached to the top that could be pushed out of the way for the medical bed to transform onto the top. A small grenade launcher was attached to one of the Vulcans, and running down the middle section, as plain as day, was an M99 Special Application Gauss Rifle. Someone was going to die on the enemy's side.

Three of the ODSTs were equipped with modified riot shields for the close quarters fighting. The riot shields were installed with a UNSC version of the jackal shield on the front, providing even more protection. Ash, Tom and Lucy were all equipped with MJOLNIR armor, and Lucy was carrying a Drop Shield armor extension. John had brought with him a bubble shield and a deployable cover given by the Arbiter's forces. Aldric was dual wielding two SMGs and had a shotgun on his back.

"Alright, move forward quietly" Aldric said over the coms. Elena had placed herself in a stationary position and had all of her stealth systems on, a complete ghost out in the middle of space. She was watching through different camera feeds attached to the helmets of each ODST and the Spartans.

"Hold up. Guards at the corridor" he whispered and suddenly crouched. Two guards were talking to each other.

"Cortana, can you translate?" Aldric asked.

"Easy" she said and the voices suddenly changed somewhat, still sounding like the elite's voices but now speaking English.

"That unholy vermin better transport that equipment carefully. Sangheilius will soon have the combined might of the Arbiter's forces and the human fleet on its doorstep" one growled.

"We should have killed them off when we had the chance, finished their home planet. Still, without this cretin, I doubt we would have been able to transfer as much weapons as we have" the second one said.

"I cannot believe Telcam would be so dishonorable as to do business with the humans. I still do not understand why they traded him for what, a few plasma weapons? We must be more careful with who we deal with. The unclean are everywhere" the first responded back.

"Indeed brother. We must not allow Sangheilius to weaken because of the humans attempting to control us. We must fight" the second said and continued down the hallway.

"Tangos moving down the hallway. Cortana, can you get a map of the asteroid?" Aldric asked.

"Yank me and put me in the terminal over there" she said and he complied, as John wasn't the one who was carrying her for this mission. He walked softly to a terminal embedded into the wall and she sprung out, a small bluish hologram.

"Ah, so they've been working on this place for a while now. It's

still not finished yet though. Let me access where their holding cells are" she said. Data scrolled over her body as she brought her hand to her head, and then looked at Aldric.

"That's funny, they don't have any cells. That could mean the Lieutenant and any other prisoners could be held in normal quarters?" she thought out loud.

"That would mean they can move about wouldn't they? Couldn't they escape?" Kelly asked.

"Where would they go? The transports are locked down and have to be turned on manually, or the remote system won't activate. Even then, it would require an access crystal that would be held by the higher echelons of the rebel faction. They're stuck. Only thing they can do is work when told and hope they don't become useless" she said softly.

"What a horrible fate. Years stuck in here, and never seeing home" Buck whispered.

"Exactly. Here, I'll put a waypoint for you and upload the map to your HUDs" she said and her hologram disappeared. Aldric pulled her chip from the terminal and inserted it back into his helmet.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score " Nothing Is Certain]\*\*

"Alright, let's move" he said and softly crept down the hallway with everyone else in tow. They slid around a corner and found a rebel Elite standing with his back to them. Fred slipped up behind him and slid his throat, holding his mandibles together with his hand. No sound came out beyond a soft gurgle as he fell to the floor, and then they dragged his body away and back down the hall. Mickey carried multiple tubes of what they called "Magic Dust" which he poured on the blood on the ground. The blood instantly congealed when the dust touched it, and then hardened, and he picked up what looked like a blue plastic plate.

"Gotta hand it to the geeks, they know how to make stealth even more stealthy" Mickey said as he handed it to another ODST who took it with the body. They moved forward and up a ramp, and then turned right and up another ramp, keeping their weapons ready. Everyone had a silencer equipped to muffle any sounds they made. The asteroid was huge, and more than likely had thousands of rebels inside. They didn't want to get into a firefight if they could avoid it.

"Heads up, they got a Brute around the corner" Buck whispered as he motioned towards the huge monkey alien. It looked like it was busy picking its nose, but it was still guarding something.

"That could be the door. Linda, handle him" Aldric said as she came up with not a sniper rifle, but a DMR silenced. She aimed down the corridor quickly and fired, and the round punched through his head and out the other side. He went down instantly and without a fuss, and they ran up and grabbed the body and pulled it down the hallway again.

"I dunno about the brain splatter man, I don't think we have enough of these tubes for that" Mickey said as he surveyed the blast of

skull bits and blood on the wall.

"Don't worry about it, let's get this door open" Aldric said as he looked at the door the Brute was guarding.

"Cortana, can you-" he tried to say, but she already had the door unlocked. They opened the door slowly before Linda stopped him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. She pointed to a small cord he could barely see attached to the door.

"We got a trap set up" Aldric said as the ODS'Ts came up with a fiber optic camera they pushed through and looked around. They saw no guards, but a fairly long hallway that led up. The cord was attached to a mine that was fixed to the wall.

"Alright" Aldric said as Mickey carefully detached the wire from the door and held onto it at the same tension as the door should have. If he let go or lowered tension, the mine would have noticed and blown.

"Careful" Cortana said.

"This is careful! You try holding the wire exactly as it's needed and not blow your face off!" Mickey snapped in a whisper. He walked carefully to the mine as Buck came in and Kelly followed. They both disarmed the mine as Mickey stood there holding the wire.

"Trip is off. You're good" Buck said as Mickey dropped the wire.

"Thank god" he whispered in relief. They headed up the hallway and to the next floor. The next door they opened onto a huge donut pathway around the outside of the asteroid.

"Oh fuck" this is bad" Buck said as he looked around. The place was massive, easily the size of High Charity and then some. The thing was hollowed out mostly, looking similar to a bee hive. The ring seemed to have ramps that would go up to the next level, as well as gravity lifts in the middle. Rebels were walking around at all different places, though a good portion of them were not carrying weapons.

"This must be a communal transfer path. They use it to move between different sections I'm guessing" Buck said.

"So how do we get up without being seen? The living quarters are ten floors above us" Kelly asked.

"We inch our way up carefully, that's what we do" John responded.

"Alright, we go in twos towards those cargo containers. Hide behind them and below the ramps. Carefully" Aldric said as he motioned towards the boxes seen on the different floors. Large pipes could be seen in all directions, most likely air conditioning or heating depending on what they were transferring or were attached to.

"You know, anybody wonder why we don't kill the lights?" Romeo

asked.

"You idiot, that would kill the power. That's what keeps this place habitable out here. If we did that we'd freeze to death, or kill the prisoners, err, prisoner" Buck chastised.

"I'm just sayin. Would make our job easier, we could have brought a spare suit for him once we find him" Romeo grumbled.

"Just shut up and watch the tops. I don't even want to know what they have in here" Buck growled.

Mickey and Dutch ran quickly to the boxes and hid behind them, and then Kelly and Linda. The ODS Ts and Spartans moved efficiently and silently through the area, up the ramps and into small rooms for cover so the rebels wouldn't see them.

"This is actually kind of fun. We've only had to take out two guards so far, we're doing pretty good" Mickey chuckled.

"Don't jinx us Private. That might just undo how well we're doing" Another ODS T sergeant replied. Mickey made a zipping motion on his helmet, emphasizing his lips were shut.

"Alright. Just a few more floors" Aldric said as he motioned for John and Fred to move up. They crept up the ramp and suddenly shot back down.

"Incoming, patrol, five" John said as they slid into the darkness of the room they were in. The patrol of rebels sauntered down the ramp and stood in front of the room they were in. They started up a conversation.

"Son of a bitchâ€¦ Why did they have to do that in front of this roomâ€¦" Dutch whispered. They all stood ready to shred the patrol if they came inside. One of the patrol guards walked up to the room and looked inside, but everyone was hidden in the shadows behind multiple pieces of plain furniture. Aldric pushed his SMGs up ready to spray him if he moved further in.

The guard turned around and walked back to his patrol, and they walked down the next ramp further down.

"Close one. Alright, let's go" Aldric said as they quickly shot out and up the ramp, hiding behind a cluster of pipes.

"There's the door" Linda said as she sighted it a floor above, guarded by another brute.

"Shit, if we move, he'll see us. He'll alert everyone else before we can get up there, and if we shoot him the chances of his body falling down are really high" Buck groaned.

"Alright, Fred, Kelly, active camo and shoot up there, take him out silently. Open the door quick so we can slip inside. Then we pull the body in with us" Aldric ordered. Green lights winked from everyone as one of the ODS T squads watched the bottom ramps for the patrol if they came back up. Kelly and Fred shot up the ramp quickly, slight glimmers changing the surroundings as their active camouflage kept them from sight. They reached the brute and stopped suddenly. Just

above them, was another brute watching.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score "Sneak Attack]\*\*

"Things are never easy are they?" Kelly whispered and slipped by the first brute. She climbed the ramp and sat right behind the second brute.

"On three. Three" Fred said as the second brute started to sniff the air. Fred slipped a knife into the first brute's neck quickly, cutting the wind pipe as Kelly grabbed the second brute's neck and snapped it. The crunch of the bones almost seemed too loud, and Kelly started dragging the body down the ramp towards Fred.

"Eyes on! Patrol coming from up above!" the second ODST squad said just as the third ODST squad noticed the first patrol come back up.

"Oh fuck this isn't good" first patrol coming up!" they said as Fred and Kelly fought to get the door open. They slid their fingers in once they unlocked it and found another trigger wire.

"Oh shit" Fred cursed as he grabbed the wire and carefully pulled it off the door. A Spartan wasn't used to finesse in their armor, and if they even moved the wrong way once or lowered the tension, the anti-tank mine would make quick work of both of them. The patrols slowly came down as Fred moved towards the mine and Kelly quickly disabled it. The rest of the group ran up as fast as they could and grabbed the bodies, with Mickey using another tube on the blood spill on the ground and waited a few seconds that felt like hours for it to harden. Mickey grabbed the plate and ran inside just as Aldric closed the door, and the patrols walked down and up their respective ramps.

"That was too close for comfort" Buck groaned. There happened to be a sliding hinge viewing window on the door, and everyone heard the patrols move in front of it.

"Shit, backs to the walls!" Aldric ordered as everyone braced as much as they could. The hinge window opened as the guard looked around. He couldn't see anything close to the door, just further down the hallway. Mickey was flattened on top of Buck as if he was further out the guard would have seen his legs.

The hinge window closed and everyone sighed in relief.

"This never leaves the asteroid Mickey" Buck grumbled.

"Sorry Eddy" he whispered and got off his Sergeant. They crept down the hallway and towards another hallway with assorted rooms. They started looking into each window.

"Hey" hey! These are living quarters!" Dutch said as he looked into one that didn't seem very clean.

"Wonder if this is the guard's living quarters or the prisoners" Mickey asked.

"I hope it's the prisoners or we have to go up another ten floors for the next section" Kelly told them.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score " Peacefully Drowning]\*\*

"Hey, there are other people here!" Tom said as he looked into one room and saw two humans, a man and a woman, looking severely emaciated.

"Let's get them out of there" Aldric said and John nodded. He reached for the door and snapped the old lock on it, then pulled the door aside. The man and woman could barely lift their heads up to see them.

"No more" please " no more" the woman weakly moaned.

"It's ok, we're here to help you" Ash said as he kneeled next to her and the ODSTs started to check their vitals.

"They don't look so good" Sergeant Garris said.

"Yeah, we need to get them to the pelican ASAP. Elena, any sign of trouble out there?" Aldric asked.

"Nothing on sensors, area is clear" she said as she watched through their video feeds.

"Still no sign of her father" Buck said softly. Two other rooms had dead bodies lying on the floor. The last room had another man who was eating a sort of mush like substance. He looked up at the ODSTs who opened the door with reverence and awe.

"We'll find him. Don't worry. We'll search this whole blasted asteroid if we have to" Aldric said.

"The whole thing?" Mickey looked worried.

"I'll do it alone if I have to Private, I don't expect you to understand, but I will get her father back to her" Aldric growled. Elena felt torn. Here Aldric was going out of his way to make almost every wish of hers come true, doing everything he could to help her or protect her, putting his life on the line for her father, and she still couldn't get her mind off of Andy.

"Alright, third squad, you take them back to the pelican, but after we've dealt with those patrols. We're gonna have to figure out a way to either take them out quickly or move them to another location" Aldric said.

"I think I can help with that" Cortana said as he looked around for a terminal. He plugged her in and she popped up with her hologram.

"Hmmm, you know, I think I just found Lieutenant Gripen. A signal was just activated for a transport to leave, and its back trace shows the location to be just above us" she said as she hacked the data in the terminal.

"What about the patrols?" Aldric asked.

"I think I can handle it. Heads up" she said as an alarm went off.



"What the fuck? I thought we were doing a stealth op here" Dutch said.

"Easy there. It's a fire alarm for up above. Andâ€¦ done. Both patrols have gone fifteen floors up to investigate, should give you some time" she said and her hologram disappeared. Aldric pulled her chip again and slid it into his helmet, then motioned for everyone to move. The third ODSF squad helped the three captives back towards the way the pelican was.

"There's the door" Cortana told him and he looked through the small hinge door to check for a mine ahead of time. There was none, and he opened it quickly, then everyone filed through and ran down the hallway towards a new room. As they slowly opened the next door, they soon found out it was a command center.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Waking Realization]\*\*

"Secondary or primary?" Buck asked.

"Hmm, looks secondary. The Primary is probably in the middle quite a few floors up. Must be a flight tower or something." Aldric peeked around the corner and saw the room was massive. Terminals all around and multiple sunken areas with control panels lining the outside of it. Unggoy were manning some, but most were asleep. In the distance they could see four rebels observing a chair, and from the chair in front they could see two human hands touching buttons. Very bony looking hands.

"Alright, let's get in there quick, kill the guards, and then get him out of there. One, two, three" Aldric said as they slipped through the command room, each trooper spreading out and taking cover as they leap frogged forward. The Spartans snapped the necks of the Unggoy sleeping as they neared the guards.

"Pleaseâ€¦ I just need a little bit of sleepâ€¦ just a bitâ€¦ I can't fly these things damn it when I can barely seeâ€¦" Aldric heard over in the distance. Elena heard as well through his acoustic channelers.

"Oh my godâ€¦" she said and nearly cried. It was her father's voice, no doubt about that.

"The patrols are coming back down guys, better make this quick" the second ODSF squad said as two of their troops were guarding the door. The drone was blocking the door out with its bulk and turrets. One of the guards used the butt of his rifle to hit the man in the chair.

"You will work!" he yelled. The hands almost looked like they went limp temporarily.

"Go go go!" Aldric said as they moved quickly forward. Fred was on the first guard in a heartbeat with his knives slicing into the guard's throat. Linda fired a round that punched clean through the second elite's head and bonked off the third, knocking him to the ground as he tried to get back up. Tom and Lucy sprayed the fourth rebel with their assault rifles, the soft pip pip pip! Of their silencers muffling the sound as its shields failed quickly and it

fell to the ground.

Aldric jumped on the third guard, the one who had hit the man in the chair.

"Let's see how you like it" he growled and started pistol whipping the guard in the face with his SMGs, breaking teeth and shattering the jaw bones. The guard couldn't even call for help, as he started to choke on his own teeth falling into his mouth, and then Aldric finished him off by putting his SMG in his left hand into his mouth and fired. The round punched through his head and splattered his brains in a very small area under.

The ODSs ran up to the chair as Aldric got up and looked over the side. Sitting in the chair, with a bleeding head wound, was Elena's father. He looked severely emaciated and his hair was going grey, cut scars could be seen on his arms and bruises were all over. His eyes looked blood shot as well as sunken into his head. His lips were cracked and dry and he was filthy.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score "Atonement"]\*\*

"Please" he said, bleary eyed as he looked up. Standing to the side of him and all around him, were Spartans. His eyes widened and he had never seen so many.

"We've come to get you out of here sir" John said as his face literally lit up.

"Oh thank god, oh fucking thank god! I had given up hope! Oh my god! Thank you so much!" he said and broke down crying. One of the ODSs put a blanket over his shoulders and they pulled a ration pack and checked his vitals.

"He needs medical care right now" one of combat medics said as half of the ODSs ran to the door and helped cover it with their brethren.

"He's almost in no shape to move" Buck said. The medic held a canteen to his lips and he drank eagerly, and then the medic pulled it away. Jack tried to reach for it again.

"Easy, easy, you can't drink so fast or it could hurt you. Slowly, bit by bit. Here, eat some of this" the medic, Sergeant Charleston said. He pulled a nutrient fruit bar, far better tasting than an emergency ration bar and far softer, and pulled off a piece and pushed it into Jack's mouth. He slowly chewed it and blinked as the fruit bar literally melted in his mouth, an effect meant to happen for those who were low on energy or strength of the jaw, as tears fell from his eyes. Elena was crying in her helmet, she couldn't help it. Her father was going to be coming home.

"This is Thorn team. We have the package. We're getting him out of here" Aldric said over the coms. Jones could be heard whooping and hollering in the background and the third squad of ODSs back at the pelican acknowledged. Their voices could also be heard with excitement.

"We got company coming! Guess the transports stopped functioning! Patrols are coming this way!" one of the ODSs said.

"We need to move. Tom, Lucy, set the bomb" Aldric ordered and they nodded. Tom had strapped to his back a small Fury Tactical Nuclear bomb and activated it. They opened a panel near one of the sunken areas and ripped out wires, throwing them off towards the other side of the room to make it look like the wires were pulled from another section. They placed the small nuclear football into the opening and closed the panel.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Dangerous Rescue]\*\*

"I got the activation ping. Cortana can blow it when we leave" Tom said and Lucy gave everyone the thumbs up.

"Heads up!" an ODST said as he held his riot shield forwards and sprayed with his SMG, a rebel dropping to the floor as multiple rebel patrols converged on them.

"How do we know there aren't any other prisoners?" Elena asked, suddenly realizing there could be more.

"We don't have time, the Alarm just went off for real! I'm sorry but we have to leave now!" Aldric said as they opened up on the door leading to the hallway they were defending. Rebels held back as the ODSTs fired a hail of rounds down the hallway and dropped three more rebels.

"Things are getting hairy out here and our exit looks blocked!" Buck yelled as he opened up with his assault rifle.

Aldric, Fred and John ran as fast as they could down the hallway and towards the patrols, firing to keep the heat on. They came out with Kelly hot on their tail, and knocked two guards down and used another as cover as one ignited an energy sword.

Aldric knocked another guard into the energy sword and he was skewered, then John rammed the guard and knocked him off the pathway and down into the open abyss below. Kelly brought her shotgun up quickly under another guard's mouth and blew his brains out, as Fred blocked a rifle butt to the helmet and slammed one of his knives down into the guard's shoulder. He twisted and rolled himself around, then threw the guard off to follow his friend, pulling his knife out on the way.

John foot swept the next guard and slammed his fist straight into his face, hearing the breaking of the mandibles and teeth and throwing him into another Elite. The ODSTs and Linda ran to assist, firing short bursts where they could as two medics carried Jack out of the command room. Tom and Lucy provided suppression fire from behind as they moved down the ramps towards the pelican. The ARGUS drones zipped out and hovered in the air, firing at rebels as they came up and down the ramps, then zipping back into the hallway for cover.

"Shit I didn't know we bypassed so many down there! The whole place is swarming!" Dutch yelled as he fired his SMG towards another patrol. They went down a level before more guards came up.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Chronicle of Heroes]\*\*

"Fuel rod!" Buck yelled and Lucy activated her drop shield. Everyone dove into it as the fuel rod cannon fired three rounds into it, dropping the shield as the fourth hit an ODST with a riot shield. He was thrown back and the energy shield on the front sparked and flickered, but he was alive.

"Take him out!" Aldric yelled as Linda fired two rounds into his helmet, hitting shields as a hail of gunfire opened up at him. The fuel rod cannon was knocked from the Elite's hand as two more shots rang from Linda's DMR, as the Sangheili rebel's shields dropped and a round punched into his chest. He dropped to the ground, a pool of blood coming from the wound.

"We gotta move" John said and Aldric nodded. They ran down the ramps as the medics carried Jack further down and straight through the door that lead to the ramp towards the bottom floors. It would eventually lead to the pelican.

"Get the drone up and firing!" Buck said as they hid behind the HAMMER drone, the armor doors opening up and the turrets coming online. The Vulcans almost vaporized a patrol of Elites in seconds as they made a sound of a wet fart, capable of slinging upwards of 4200 rounds per minute.

"Thank your friend later Elena! This thing rocks ass!" Buck yelled over the coms as a missile launched from the top of it. It fired a grenade that arched into an opening up above, and three rebels were blown out and down into the empty depths below. The Stanchion rifle was aimed clear across the pathway they were on, over to the other side than even Linda was having difficulty seeing. It fired and they saw what they believe to be an assault group disappear from the impact.

"Damn thing has an anti-tank weapon! Hell yeah!" Mickey whooped as he tossed a grenade.

"HOSTILES DETECTED. DROP YOUR WEAPONS YOU HAVE THREE SECONDS TO COMPLY" a deep robotic voice echoed from the drone as it tracked the area and looked for Sangheili or brutes.

"Swap it to medical mode!" Elena told them as the medics pressed a button on the drone and it transformed, the missile launcher rotating down behind and the bed opening up. The armored panels changed to protect Jack as they lowered him onto it and strapped him in. The turrets were still firing as they moved down the ramp and towards the hallway.

"We've got shit trying to handle us at the pelican! Brute attack groups!" Jones said as gunfire was heard outside, the ODSTs sent back with the captives holding the line.

"Send the ARGUS drones on a bombing run!" Elena told them.

"What? There are no bombs on the things!" Buck said as a brute charged him. He sprayed its head with his assault rifle and knocked the helmet off, then planted three bullets into his forehead.

"It's a maneuver not a weapon control! It'll use whatever is equipped on it and just fly over the hallway spraying at the enemy!" she yelled. Aldric applied the maneuver and the ARGUS drones flitted down

the hallway, spraying back and forth with their small machine guns. One was knocked out of the sky and it slammed into the ground, as a brute ran over to it and stomped on it as it tried to get up. Sparks flew as the drone was dented and crushed, a small fire appearing on one piece.

"We're almost there!" Buck said as an ODS'T in the second squad was knocked into a wall, knocking debris off it and falling to the floor. He sprayed at the brute that hit him and took him down, as another ODS'T ran up and carried him down the hallway. He was alive, but definitely hurt.

Thorn team pushed back towards the pelican, leap frogging while providing covering fire as they retreated. The ARGUS drone continued to fire from the doorway as everything loaded up.

"Package in the pelican!" Aldric said as both drones got into the pelican and they lifted off. Jones opened up with the chin gun at the door as they headed straight out. Elena was hot on their heels as they engaged the active camo and photo cell panels.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score "We Owe You Our Lives"]\*\*

"Mission complete, only one ARGUS drone lost. No casualties" Aldric said as the \_Conundrum\_ CIC cheered.

"Your daughter is gonna love having you back" Buck told Jack as he lay on the drone.

"She'sâ€¦ she's here?" Jack asked.

"She's flying escort right next to us. She's a fighter pilot, and a damned good one at that" Buck responded. Jack looked around as the medics inserted a catheter into his arm and attached a saline bag to it. They then pushed some aspirin chewables into his mouth and pushed a needle in his arm to apply medical plasma.

"She's a fighter pilot?" Jack asked blinking from how his eyes hurt.

"Yup, and a Colonel too. You'll see her when we get back" Aldric told him. He looked up at the blue armored Spartan then around at everyone else.

"He needs to rest" one of the medics said as he put another needle in his arm and injected a mixture of morphine and antibiotics. He then injected a sleep aid into the saline bag's tube. Jack started to drift off.

"Thank youâ€¦ so muchâ€¦" he said and nodded off.

The asteroid base in the distance suddenly had a large explosion near its side as a part of the asteroid blew off, explosive decompression setting in. The Fury Tactical Nuke was not designed to take out something so large, but in the right place with assistance from space it could severely damage the base.

Elena flipped around temporarily next to the pelican and aimed. She had equipped as one of her missiles a Ra class nuke, and she fired it straight at the asteroid base.

"I thought we said no doing anything" Dare said over the coms.

"They already opened fire, I was covering the pelican's exit" she quipped. Dare could be heard chuckling in the background.

The nuke struck and blew, the asteroid cracking in half from the detonation.

\*\*[1200 hours, December 17\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Leaving Erule Colony]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Epic Score " I Have a Story]\*\*

Elena sat in a chair while watching her father. He was resting in the medical bed peacefully, and had a saline bag attached. No surgeries were needed. His diagnosis was severe dehydration and lack of nutrition, but he would make a full recovery.

Jack woke up to see Elena sitting next to him groggily. Milo was standing to her side.

"Hey dad" she said as she looked as if she was crying. She picked up his hand and squeezed it.

"Elena? Oh myâ€¦ I can't believe it, you found me" he said chuckling. She smiled and reached to hug him. His arms were weak, too weak. No more was he the strong muscular father she used to know. He looked so old with the breakdown of his muscles from malnutrition.

"Hey pops" Milo said as Jack looked at him.

"Milo too? What? Howâ€¦ I don't want to know yet, I'm just so glad you two are here" he said and hugged his son.

"I joined the marines. I'm a corporal, Artillery Observer. I do pretty well" he said and smiled.

"Well I'll be. I can't believe it. And you, Elenaâ€¦ a Colonel?" he asked.

"Yup, Colonel of the UNSC Air Force. I have my own wing of fighters now" she said and giggled. He looked amazed between the two of them.

"We found you dad. We lost you twice already, third time was the charm" Milo told him.

"Whatâ€¦ the condolence lettersâ€¦ but how did you lose me twice?" he asked.

"The insurgents placed a dummy body in your flight suit in the pelican, so when we found Echo 2-1-2â€¦" Elena trailed off and looked away.

"I seeâ€¦ I didn't know what was in store for me when they picked me up. My pelican wasn't responding at all. Once the battle cruiser left I did what I could to steady my movement. A tug came around and picked me up. I thought they were rescuing me until I had a gun to my head. Then laterâ€¦ theyâ€¦ they traded me for something, I don't

know what it was. And that was it. Very simple" he told them as he thought back to the asteroid.

"How long were you there dad?" Elena asked as she squeezed his hand comfortingly.

"Four years I thinkâ€¦ maybe five? What's the date today? I tried to count the days, but then it just blurred. I know was held captive by insurgents forâ€¦ I don't know. I had no idea what they wanted from me, I was just a pilot. Sure I had to do maintenance on pelicans or they'd beat me, butâ€¦" he trailed off.

"It's ok daddy. We're here. No one is going to hurt you again, I promise. You're safe now. You're in the middle of a UNSC fleet" she said as she patted him on the shoulder.

"I'm just glad I could see you two againâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I never really got to say goodbye when that thing hadâ€¦" he said and started to cry. Elena had him lean his head against her shoulder and rubbed his back. Milo held his other hand.

"God it's good to be back, you have no idea what that horror was like" he said in between fits of crying. He was almost broken. The once strong man she knew was going to have to get a full psych evaluation and physical rehabilitation most likely.

"Shhh, relaxâ€¦ you're with us now. We're here dad. Ezekiel is coming up, Buck is here, even the Master Chief, remember? He helped save you with a whole bunch of other Spartans. You're gonna be just fine" she softly said in a soothing voice. He slowly stopped crying over a few minutes.

"I thought about you guys every day. I wondered when a rescue team would show up. Eventually, you justâ€¦ give up after so long" he said and looked at both of them.

"Colonel?" a doctor said from the door. Elena looked up and then back to her father.

"I'll be right back ok? Don't worry" she said and put his hand down on the bed as Milo nodded and continued talking to him. She walked to the door to the doctor.

"So?" she asked.

"The other three, the rescues? The woman is in a coma and the two men didn't make it. The woman was a Lieutenant Janis and the men were Lieutenant Soben and Sergeant Renso. Your father is severely sleep deprived and malnourished. His body is going to have to go through rehabilitation so he can move on his own. His nervous system is frayed as well" the doctor told her.

"When do you think he'll be well enough to start rehab?" She asked.

"Maybe a week if he reacts well to the nutrient deposits we'll be injecting under his skin. His body will absorb them and use it to rebuild the muscles. It's a safe process. Once that is done, he just has to go through some tests in walking and regain his center of balance" the doctor said as she cleaned her glasses.

"Any side effects?" Elena asked.

"None. It's a simple procedure. Don't worry. We'll take good care of him, I promise you" the doctor said.

"Pinkie swear me" Elena asked. The doctor looked surprised, and then looked down at her finger. She then pinkie swore and Elena smiled.

"Old habit; I don't tend to believe normal promises are kept; pinkie swearing makes it true usually. A good luck move sort of" she explained. The doctor nodded and looked at Jack talking to Milo.

"Colonel Gripen to the bridge" Elena heard over the intercom. Elena looked up then at the doctor, and then towards her father. Both Milo and he were looking at her. She sighed and walked into the room.

"I am so sorry dad, I have to go" she said wincing as she kissed him on the forehead.

"It's alright, I'm not going anywhere fly girl. I'll be here" he hoarsely said with a weak voice. She smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'll be back later, I swear it" she said and walked out of the room. She then walked to the lift and went to the bridge.

\*\*[Music: Two Steps From Hell " Love & Loss]\*\*

"Alright, what's going-" she started to say as Dare and Hood turned around.

"We just detected the alien fighter's slip space output nearby. It's coming to intercept us" Hood told her. Elena was stunned.

She was going to have to fight it off.

(Author's Note: Hmmm, I've always wondered why the UNSC didn't use more drones while fighting the Covenant. Even the U.S. military is working to unman the front lines with machine gun equipped drones right now, just doesn't seem viable in the future. Eh, maybe there was a lapse in military control during the interplanetary wars or something. This chapter doesn't do Jack justice. To be held captive in an asteroid base for five years transporting things for the enemy, and being used as a slave basically, with no hope of rescue! Please review!)

## 17. Retaliation

\*\*[Music: Epic Score " We Need a Plan]\*\*

Elena shot down to the hangar as fast as her legs would carry her. She entered the hangar to find everyone was rushing around moving crates away and locking ordinance carriers onto the fighters.

"Attention all crew! Hostile forces have been detected! All emergency



crews to your sectors! All marines prepare for combat, this is not a drill!" She heard over the coms as pilots rushed out of the changing room as she ran in. She slipped to her suit quickly, not even giving a damn if anyone saw her nude as multiple other women were changing as well.

She ran out of the room and towards her fighter while she put her helmet on and locked it in place.

"Get those rounds loaded! Now!" Ezekiel barked as maintenance techs ran to load missiles onto the fighters.

She ran up the staircase and got into her fighter, then shot through her preflight quickly and closed the cockpit.

"Raptor Squadron, in the void" "Cougar squadron in the void" "Rhino squadron taking off" "Viper squadron launching" she heard over the coms as things were getting very hectic. Battle chatter was being heard as almost every fighter squadron was launching from their respective ships.

"Vultures launching" she suddenly heard. Things must be bad if they were moving ground support to help in space.

"Raven 2-1 in the void" "Raven 3-1 launching" "Raven 4-1 outbound" "Raven 5-1 hitting the afterburners" she noticed come from the coms as she finished her load out. Her squadron was already out there. She needed to be quick.

"Raven 1-1 ready to launch" she said to the CIC as they loaded her on the mag rail and closed the back blast doors. She suddenly shot out like a bullet and engaged her engines after a short distance, the rest of her fighter squadron grouping up on her wing.

"Colonel, where the hell is it?" Roberts asked.

"Beats the fuck out of me, I just found out. Eyes frosty, weapons active. This thing could be hiding anywhere. I got no joy" she warned as all fighters stayed in front of their launching ships.

"Raven 1-1 this is Raptor 2-1, how copy" she heard come over the coms. Jones.

"Good copy Raptor 2-1, status?" she asked.

"Status good, no joy. This is getting freaky Elena. We were briefed in less than a minute about this. What is it?" he asked.

"An unknown fighter craft, and it's very powerful. Keep clear if you see it, let Raven squadron handle it if possible. If not, engage with extreme caution and with everybody else backing you up" she warned.

"It's really that scary? Shitâ€¦ copy that, we'll watch your backs. Good hunting" he replied and the com link stopped.

"We got a power reading anywhere?" Elena asked.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" They Hit Without Warning]\*\*

"Umâ€¦ nothing, I can't detect anything out there yetâ€¦ still tryingâ€¦ ECCM systems are maxedâ€¦" Sarah told her.

"Merricks, you have the particle cannons installed" Elena said matter of factly.

"Yeah, sorryâ€¦ I just figured, well, it might help" he said.

"No worries, I don't care about it this time. Use whatever you have on the thing, we might need those" she said as she realized she didn't have them equipped. It was advanced dog fighting weaponry; an entire two bays full of anionic warheads and two micro missile launchers.

"I think I have itâ€¦ rechecking, sending IFF pingâ€¦ no joy yet" Sarah said.

"No response! It's hostile!" she said scared.

"Go loud Ravens!" Elena yelled as she shot forward and saw it in the far distance. It had already charged its weapons and fired.

"Break!" she ordered and everyone scattered, as the thing shot through where they used to be.

"I see him I see him!" Roberts flipped back around as Elena shot after him, Aldric catching up quick.

"Merricks get a shot off with those cannons!" she said as Merricks lined up a vector towards the fighter.

"I almost have a lockâ€¦ one more secondâ€¦" he said as the particle cannons charged. They were extremely powerful weapons but had to be led on the enemy as well as had a charge time of 3 seconds, deadly in a dog fight if he was being attacked.

The alien fighter suddenly shot straight up in a right degree angle, and Elena flipped and compensated, launching right after him. Roberts and Aldric kept with her.

"Firing" Roberts said as he fired an anionic warhead as Aldric did the same. Both flew out and nearly hit the fighter, but it flipped around and shot them out of the sky.

"Shit, it knows about those!" Roberts looked astonished as Sarah tried to flank it. The thing aimed right at her and fired.

"Ah!" she screamed and dodged out of the way, her two gauss rounds doing almost nothing to its shields.

Elena opened up on it with her Vulcans, leading it left and then firing four Penetrators towards it. It flipped to fire at the missiles, but then she had already known this and fired her laser from another angle. Its shields flickered and died slowly during the entire charge from the laser, but it was still keeping in the fight with no hull damage.

"Thing is incredible!" Aldric said as he opened up with his gauss cannons, gaining no purchase of damage on the armor.

The alien fighter shot off towards the asteroid belt.

"Keep engaged Ravens! Keep engaged! Take that thing out!" Admiral Hood said over the coms.

"You heard him! Let's make that thing a floating paper weight!" Elena ordered and green lights winked from all of her squadron.

"The thing is gonna try to hideâ€¦ We gotta cut him off!" Aldric said as he pushed faster than everyone else. Elena caught up quickly.

"Hold up! Keep an eye for its moves. It can catch us off guard in ways we haven't figured out yet" Elena ordered.

"Sorry, but if we don't catch him, he'll sneak off to the belt and we'll never find him, or he'll find us while we look for him" Aldric told her.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Ninth Dimension]\*\*

"I know that! But still, carefully. We already had problems in the belt the first time coming in, I don't want a repeat going out!" she warned.

"Understood. Roberts, we can flank-" Aldric tried to say just as another slip space portal opened up nearby.

"What the-" Aldric said as another alien fighter shot out firing its beams right at him. His shields failed.

"Breaking off!" he yelled and flipped and shot left, with Roberts and the rest of the squadron in tow.

"Handle the second one! I'll head off the first!" Elena ordered and engaged her afterburners to speed up. The first one flipped around now that it had back up and fired. She dodged and fired a full salvo of micro missiles at it. The beams cut through most of them but a few struck as she fired her Vulcans and swapped to gauss cannons, hitting it in the face.

The thing ran quickly and headed towards the planet and Elena followed.

"Raven 1-1, its leading you!" Jones said over the coms. The other fighters were nowhere near them but trying to catch up. One frigate, Ride The Light, was already nearby coming to assist.

"Raven 1-1, lead it through our trackers, we'll light it up" the ship's CIC said.

"Understood" she replied to the CIC. She started to do her best to knock the thing into a different maneuver. The rail guns on the frigate opened up towards the fighter as it dodged what it could, its shields already recharging and taking what hits it gained.

Elena dodged another beam from it and fired her Vulcans, as it dodged and shot up and then over her, trying to fire from above.

"Shit!" she cursed and angled sideways just as it fired, and the beam

passed right by her belly. She fired her thrusters and rotated her fighter on the same angle, firing as she did so at the boxy fighter. She started to strafe it with her Vulcans and gauss cannons. Its shields flickered quicker and finally died as she emptied what was left inside her micro missile launchers into it.

The thing took damage but was still fighting, some of its armor blowing off.

"Damn this thing keeps dodging us!" Aldric said as she looked quickly through her side cams and magnified in her helmet to see Aldric and the others fighting the other craft. They had dropped its shields twice already, but it was still fighting. It had taken three Long Sword IIs down, the hulks of them floating through space. Two gunships were burning something outside of the hull but still fighting and moving.

"Mayday! Mayday! I'm hit!" A sabre pilot said as his armor blew off and the right thruster nacelle snapped apart, he careening out of control away from everyone else.

"Flash volley outbound!" she yelled as she fired every missile she had at the fighter she was engaging. Its shields were doing its best to recharge while she attacked it, and it fired to destroy what it could. She dodged as quickly as she could but part of the beam still grazed her shields. They dropped to 70 percent just from that graze.

"Holy shit that thing is potentâ€|" she said to herself as it fired again.

"INCOMING!" the frigate's CIC suddenly yelled as she wondered what was going on, too busy with dodging the beam from the fighter.

Another alien fighter shot out of a portal, firing its beams straight into her.

"I'm hit!" she yelled as her shields tried to deflect as much energy as they could, but failed right after. One of the beams carved into her left wing, and her left gauss cannon melted from the damage.

"Critical damage!" she said as the first fighter regrouped with the third, and went in for the kill. She couldn't maneuver as her systems sputtered to compensate. They dove straight at her and fired.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Agenda]\*\*

Time seemed to slow down to a crawl as she saw them open up on her, as just before the beams chargedâ€| \_Ride The Light\_ shot forward to block the paths.

"Oh godâ€|" she whispered as the frigate took the full brunt of the beams, carving into its sides as armor blew off. The frigate tried to return fire, but the fighters dodged and continued their assault.

"Critical system failure! Engines off line! We're losing her!" she

could hear over the coms. The frigate started to have hull breaches everywhere as parts were carved off. Ride The Light took the hits for her. 300 hundred men and women on board with unknown amount of marines just took attacks meant to take her out.

"NO! FOR THE LOVE OF GOD NO!" she screamed as the frigate's armor blew off, the ship slowly falling out of orbit of the planet as it did so, as fires could be seen on all decks as it sunk through the atmosphere. Escape pods tried to fire out of it, but the fighters would have none of that, as either the pods fired right into contact with the atmosphere and blew up from the angle, or the fighters gutted them as they came out.

"YOU BASTARDS!" she screamed as an armor panel from the frigate flew right towards her. It slammed into the cockpit as she couldn't get out of the way and scrambled her systems. Her fighter was knocked around as the panel smashed in the cockpit somewhat, bending it towards her and smacking her against the opposite side. She was knocked unconscious from the severe impact as another detonation happened on the other side of the panel and pinned her down against the seat. The nose of her fighter was sheared off, and her right engine was still sputtering, slowly turning her. All control panels were flashing.

"Ah shit! ELENA!" Aldric yelled as he shot towards where her position was. Jones joined up as the second fighter tried to regroup with the other two.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score " They Fought As Legends]\*\*

"Three of them? Son of a bitch! This is bad! We need a volley on this location Conundrum!" Jones requested as multiple frigates and cruisers, including the carrier Conundrum came to assist.

"Roger that, firing missiles" CIC said as the combined mass of UNSC fighters engaged the three alien craft. A wall of missiles flew out from all of them as the fighters backed off and dodged, though a good portion of them hit. One of the fighters lost control of its thrusters from so many impacts that it careened off into space, just as the second fighter shot after it and grappled it. It realigned itself and continued functioning.

"How the hell do we stop these things?" Jones said as he fired multiple locks of missiles at one from his Sabre. The fighter dodged the first lock and was then hit by the others as it fired at Jones. His shields failed but he moved out of the way as it tried to carve into his armor.

"Elena! Elena can you hear me!" Aldric said over the coms. No response. Her fighter was critically damaged and venting atmosphere from some holes in the cockpit.

"Oh shit! we need a tug out here!" Aldric yelled as he fired blindly at the fighters, as they zipped around and dodged his Vulcans.

"Sarah! Sarah, flank right, Merricks aim as it tries to chase her!" Roberts said suddenly. Sarah agreed hesitantly as she fired and ran at the first fighter, as it gave chase. Merricks aimed his particle cannons at it and fired as it charged its beam to attack her. The

particle cannons punched clean through the shields and crashed into the armor, tearing huge chunks out of it.

"Alright!" Roberts cheered as he fired two anionic missiles at it and sprayed his Vulcans. The shields must have been hit as the missiles struck and tore more chunks out of it, and the Vulcans shredded the aft section. Fires broke out all over it as it literally stopped moving. Jones swung back around and sprayed his 30mm autocannons at it, stronger than the Vulcans in hammering power but lower in armor piercing capability. Huge dents enveloped it as his rounds finished it off. It wasn't moving at all, but all of its power went off outside, no lights showing.

"We got it!" Jones cheered.

"Alright, one down two to go!" Aldric said as they came back around with the rest of the swarm of UNSC fighters.

"CIC it is a Fur Ball out here!" he growled as the fighters took another shot at Aldric. He dodged halfway as the beam slid off of his shields and into Roberts, and both of their shields dropped to 20 percent.

"Charge that particle cannon up again Merricks!" Aldric said.

"I'm trying but the power couplings are restabilizing!" he said as he flipped through multiple venting controls.

Sarah shot after another and fired all her missiles in one volley, spreading them out to stop them from being shot out of the void.

Both fighters fired at them and cleaved through almost all but one, and it hit and did very little damage to one of them.

"This is not going wellâ€|" Aldric grumbled worriedly as they tried to flank the two fighters.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, the fighters disengaged and shot off.

"Hostiles are bugging out" Jones said as they slowed down, seeing two portals open up and the fighters disappear through them.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" We'll Protect You]\*\*

"Fuck, where's that tug!" Aldric said as he turned his fighter around and saw the tug coming up near Elena's fighter. It was a sad sight. Two melted holes were in the right wing, the left engine was gone, the left wing was gone, the nose was ripped off and the cockpit was damaged and losing atmosphere. The right wing was bent in an odd shape.

"God noâ€|" Roberts whispered. The tug pulled her fighter into its bay and flew towards the \_Conundrum\_.

"CIC this is Raven 4-1, tug is coming; we need a medical crash team on the deck ASAP" Aldric said over the coms.

"Copy that, medical team is on standby" CIC responded. They flew

towards their hangars and landed. The tug landed and opened its bay, as Aldric ran to the fighter and jumped onto the cockpit. John and Fred were running to the hangar and jumped on as well.

"Help me rip this thing off!" he said as he tried to unlock the cockpit but the controls were fried. All three Spartans grabbed the outside of the cockpit and ripped it clean off its hinges, the hydraulics giving way as the pistons flew out of their holders.

Elena lay there unresponsive, with her helmet looking somewhat damaged. Her right ocular attachment was sputtering and her face mask almost looked cracked.

"Let's get her out" Fred said as they picked her up limply in their arms and carried her down to a medical bed as it rolled up. Buck and Renee just ran into the hangar to see them put her on the bed.

"Her breathing is good and her pulse is still strong, but it looks like she had a concussion from the panel hitting her. We'll take it from here" one of the medical team said as they wheeled her out of the hangar while taking her helmet off. Aldric followed with the others as they took her to the medical bay.

"Whoa whoa whoa, too many people in here, you guys can wait outside, only a few at a time" the doctor said.

Jack and Milo were in another medical room watching out of the glass doors. They saw Elena laying on the bed and Jack pushed himself up and tried to climb out of the bed.

"No!" he yelled as Milo pushed him back. Jack was crying as she lay unresponsive. The doctor put a breathing mask over her mouth and nose and checked her blood pressure. She then carried a small scanner over her head and pulled it back.

"No skull fractures or severe trauma. BP is good. Let's get her in the next room" she said as the medical team wheeled her in. Aldric and the others watched from the doors as they slid closed.

"How could this happenâ€¦ she's the best of usâ€¦" Merricks said.

"She got caught by one hell of an ambush. I don't think even she could have fought two of those things at the same time, and we had three out there. THREE!" Jones grumbled.

Everyone milled about talking. Captain Dare walked up to all of them.

"I know you are worried for Colonel Gripen but it looks like she'll be fine. She just has to rest. The rest of you need to get back to your duties. That attack was out of the blue. There could be more of them and that's why you can't be sitting around here. Everyone move out" she ordered.

The small group grumbled and walked in different directions as Admiral Hood walked up with Dr. Wright. Aldric just stood there and sighed.

"Is something wrong with your hearing Commander?" Dare asked.

"No ma'amâ€¦ just worried about her" he said softly as he looked through the door one last time and looked through the glass doors to her medical room. She was lying peacefully on the bed, unconscious.

"She'll be fine. She was lucky to only have that happen. The amount of damage that was caused to her fighter wasâ€¦ extreme. Even more than Lieutenant Jacobs's fighter" Dare told him.

"I must admit, I find it hard to believe with the severity of their attacks on her that she could survive with just a concussion. Someone must be looking out for her" Dr. Wright said softly.

"You can see her later when she wakes up Commander. Dismissed" Dare told him. He saluted her and the admiral then left.

"Ironical, is it not? Her fighter is scrap and just when the next shipment of supplies is coming to us" Dr. Wright said as he pushed his glasses up his nose.

"How the hell is that ironical? She's in the medical bay and her fighter is barely enough to fill an envelope. She can't make use of any of that stuff" Dare said confused.

"Actually, yes she can my dear. You see, on that shipmentâ€¦ Black Blade MK II is coming. There is only one on board, but I believe it is just what the doctor ordered, and with newer forerunner technologyâ€¦ and even some of the alien tech as well" he told her. She looked shocked.

"Now my dear, you do understand it is classified as above top secret? I only tell this as it will be on board this ship. Only Ezekiel and his maintenance crew as well as Elena are allowed to know the full details. Admiral Hood, I apologize, but not even you have full clearance" Dr. Wright told them. Hood looked surprised, but then nodded.

"I take it Air Force security?" he asked.

"Even beyond that" he said.

"Alright. Keep me posted. I need to prep the fleet for a potential threat if those fighters come back" Hood told them. Captain Dare saluted him and he saluted back then walked off.

"I'm going to see if that fighter has been brought into the hangar yet" Veronica said.

"I highly advise you don't go poking around with it Captain. We still don't know if that thing is truly "dead" yet" he warned.

"I'm just going to see if it's there doctor. I know all about the top secret things remember?" she said annoyed as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Top secret things from ONI you mean. This is beyond your scope. ONI is to stand down on this" he told her.



"Under whose authority?" she snapped.

"The Secretary of Defense, James Rickenbacker per my request. Please Captain, don't make a mountain out of a mole hill here. What we learn from this could give us an edge against these things. Please, go oversee the collection of the fighter. I'll see to Elena" he said. She narrowed her eyes at him then walked off. He walked into the medical bay and into Elena's room.

"Is she gonna be ok?" Milo said from across the hall.

"She'll be fine my boy. Just fine. She's just resting. She'll be back on her feet as soon as she wakes up" he said smiling. Milo sighed in relief. Jack looked worried.

"Just a bump on the head for her Jack old boy, just a bump. You don't have to worry" he said as Jack stared at his daughter through the glass doors. Dr. Wright turned around and looked at Elena as he walked into her room, the glass doors closing.

"You my dear, have been through quite a bit. You were just shown up by those hooligans out there, and your wings have temporarily been clipped. I wonder, could those be what we have so long ago known about? Could those beâ€| noâ€| they couldn'tâ€| if the forerunners didn't survive, how could they? Precursorsâ€| preposterousâ€|" he said halfway to Elena and to himself.

\*\*[2100 hours, December 17 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Outside of asteroid belt, Erule Colony]\*\*

Elena woke up slowly. Her head hurt, and she looked around the medical room.

"How are you feeling?" Dr. Wright asked to the left of her. She scoffed.

"Like I got hit in the head with a dodge ballâ€|" she grumbled and brought her hands to her face.

"You've been knocked unconscious for some time my dear. Do you remember what happened?" he asked.

"Somewhat. I was fighting that alien craft, and then, another came out of nowhere and hit meâ€| thenâ€| oh godâ€| tell me they didn'tâ€|" she trailed off. Her face turned to one of horror.

"I'm afraid they did my dear. They sacrificed themselves as you were registered as a tier 1 asset against those craft. They took the brunt of the attacks as they returned fire. They died fighting honorably" he told her.

"They didn't need to die at all for me!" she yelled and hid her face, feeling tears well up in her eyes.

"They chose that for themselves Elena. They did it of their own free will. You should be grateful they considered you bigger than their own lives. You can't change what happened my dear, you can only fight to remember their sacrifice" he told her softly. She looked up at him from her position on the pillow.

"I want the entire roster of that ship sent to me. I have to remember them. They aren't just disappearing" she told him.

"I'll have Captain Dare send it to you. Now, I'm afraid I have to do some quick checkups on you before you can leave the medical bay" he said and smiled comfortingly. He pulled a small pen light and shined it into her eyes, and then checked her pulse and her breathing. He then checked her ears and then opened her mouth and looked even into her nose.

"Alright my dear, you are out of here with a clean bill of health" he said.

"Aside from the headache" she said and closed her eyes.

"Hmm, that should go away in an hour I would guess. Here, take some pain relievers and it should help. You should get something to eat, you must be starving" he told her. She thanked him and walked out of the room and out of the medical bay.

"Oh, Elena my dear, you would want to know what happened to your fighter before you go eat. And one other thing, there is a surprise for you tomorrow at 6am, errâ€¦ 0600 hours" he said through the doors.

"What sort of surprise?" she asked.

"If I told you that, it wouldn't be a surprise now would it?" he chuckled. She rolled her eyes and walked away.

Elena made her way to the lift and went down to the hangar before she would go to the DFAC. She entered and saw the maintenance crew stop in their tracks.

"Hey hey! She's alive!" one of them said.

"Of course she's alive ya git! She only took a bonk to the head for bloody sakes! Get that fuel line out of the way and get back to work" Ezekiel said as he walked up to her. She looked up at him as his eyes softened.

"How are you feeling girlie? Better after your nap?" he asked chuckling.

"I'm still ticking, so yeahâ€¦ better than my fighter it looks like" she said as she walked over to it. The entire thing she knew was irreparable. Far too much damage was done to it.

"I'm sorry, but we don't have the materials to replace the frame here Elenaâ€¦ it's a lost cause" he told her as he put his hand on her shoulder.

"I kind of figured that. Still it took care of me out there. Surprised I made it in one piece with the damage it took" she said and patted the side armor of the fighter.

"Sadly Elena, there are no spare Black Blades for you to pilot. There were only five made, and nowâ€¦ I'm sorry to say, but unless you can get another, you're sort of grounded" he said sadly.

"I knew that Zeks. I guess it gives me a reason to catch up on all of that paperwork that has been piling up for my signature in my room. I just had to see it for myself. Well, I guess I should go get something to eat" she told him and smiled. He nodded as she walked out of the hangar and back to the lift.

She got out and walked to the DFAC at a leisurely pace, and then entered. Most of the room was empty aside from a few people talking at different tables. She walked up to the counters and grabbed a tray, then piled on what she felt like as she was extremely hungry.

She sat down in a corner and ate her food quietly. No one seemed to notice her. After she had finished her food, she got up and put her tray on top of the trashcan, then walked out of the door. Aldric was just walking in.

"Hey, I've been looking everywhere for you. I heard you got out of the medical bay. How are you feeling?" he asked as he put his hand on her shoulder.

"Better. I guess I took quite a wallop from that panel flying" she chuckled. He didn't laugh.

"I was really worried about you" he said softly. She blushed and then shook her head.

"Aldricâ€¦ Iâ€¦" she tried to find the words to tell him, to tell him she wasn't interested. She tried to find the words to make it official to him, and her at the same time.

"You don't have to say anything, I understand" he said softly.

"You do?" she asked a little confused.

"Uhuh. Don't worry" he said and tilted her head up towards his with his finger under her chin. He gazed deeply into her eyes as they slowly gravitated towards each other.

"Butâ€¦" she whispered.

"Shhhâ€¦" he whispered softly as he moved closer to her. Her eyelids slowly closed as he came towards her, closing halfway as he started to lean in to kiss her.

\_STOP! ANDY!\_ Her brain screamed and she backed up a bit out of her trance.

"Is something wrong? Did I do something wrong Elena?" he asked worried.

"No, nothing wrong. Aldricâ€¦ we need to talk" she said as she sighed.

"I'm going too fast. I'm sorry, I can go slower. I can do whatever you need me to do. I justâ€¦ I want you to be happy" he told her. Her heart fluttered and she steeled herself.

"Aldric, that's not it. You see this ring? It's an engagement ring. That means I have a fiancÃ©. I love him Aldric. I really do. He's

sweet and kind and always listens to me and patient andâ€¦ I justâ€¦ I can't do this. I can't turn my back on him out here. Please understand" she explained, worry etched in her eyes as she put her hand up showing the ring. He listened and nodded.

"Elena, I understand, and I know you love him. Butâ€¦ long distance relationshipsâ€¦ they tend to fall apart. I had a girlfriend a long time ago who went to college away from me. I found out later she was cheating and she thought she found true love beyond me, so I got dumped. It happens. Now she's married happily to him. I'm happy for her regardless of what happened to me. Are you sure you can keep this relationship going with him? How long do you think this war will go on?" he asked.

"Long distance relationships can work! Trust is a factor. He trusts me, and I trust him. Implicitly as a matter of fact. I've known him for so long, Iâ€¦" she trailed off finding the words.

"How do you know you truly care for him Elena? Are you sure you're meant for each other? You're a pilot, he's, what is he, you said a fire fighter one time? He can't understand that. He can't understand your emotions when you fly. You need someone who can listen to that. I can listen Elena. Give me a chance" he said softly as he held her hand, the one with the ring on it. He was so gentle, so caring, it was hard to see him as a Spartan. He slowly pulled the engagement ring off of her finger as she watched, almost in a trance.

\_Don't do this to him girlâ€¦ if you let this happen, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. You just met Aldric. You've known Andy for most of your life, and he waited for you. He's the most patient man you've ever met. Can Aldric say the same?\_

Elena grabbed his hand and stopped him. He looked into her eyes.

"No. I can't do this. I'm sorry Aldric, but this can't happen. Please listen. Whatever happens between Andy and I is purely between him and me. If we're doomed to not be together, then I'll let him decide, not me. I've had enough pain in my life already, a little more wouldn't make much of a difference if he decided otherwise, but I want it to work or not work. I am not going to cheat on him." Aldric stood back a foot and let go of her hand softly.

"I understand Elena, and I'm sorry. I hope you don't go through that pain and have a happy life together. Truly I do. If you don't, well, I can be patient too you know" he said smiling. He was taking it surprisingly well.

"If we broke up, you'd be the first person that can come knocking on my door" she chuckled.

"Yeah, I just might do that. He really is a lucky man to have you" he almost whispered. She felt sorry for him.

"Thank you for saving my father though. Iâ€¦ I know you didn't have to put so much effort into that as you didâ€¦" she said as she looked towards the ground, unable to meet his gaze.

"He was still a member of the UNSC and a human being Elena. I still would have put out one hundred percent to save him. It was my

pleasure to see you happy with him being back. Your face lights up when good things happen. The whole room glows when you do that. It's a special feature that I only see when you're around" he said and chuckled.

"I'm sorryâ€¦ I justâ€¦ can we be friends? And please don't let this interfere with our jobs" she asked. He nodded.

"Yeah, sure, no worries. I can do that no problem. Iâ€¦ know you don't have a fighter right now. She looks pretty wrecked out there in the hangar. We could always get you registered for a Sabre if it comes down to it" he said understanding what she told him and trying to change the subject.

"Somehow, I don't think so. I should get caught up with the paperwork I have waiting for me in my room before I go off and take another one out there" she told him. He nodded and smiled. They both just stood there in an awkward moment of silence.

"Well, I should get something to eat. Um, we can still be dance partners right?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure. I don't have a problem with that. It's still fun and good exercise" she giggled.

"Good, cause I wouldn't want it to be, you know, awkward" he told her.

"It's alright. Don't worry. I'll catch you later" she told him. He nodded and walked into the DFAC as she headed to her quarters. She sat down at her desk and activated her terminal and data pad and started going through reports and logs long since overdue that required her signature specifically.

\*\*[0600 hours, December 18\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Outside of asteroid of Erule colony, Resupply]\*\*

Elena was walking down a hallway, she didn't know where she was. No one else was around, and it was deathly quiet.

"Hello?" she asked. No response. She walked further down the hallway as if it went on forever. She finally reached a door and opened it. Behind it was her bedroom back in San Francisco. She walked in and looked around. Everything was the same except for a picture on the window sill next to her Long Sword model. She picked it up and saw it showed her in a bridal gown and Andy next to her in a tuxedo.

"We gotâ€¦ married? I thought it wasn't for anotherâ€¦" she trailed off as she looked behind her.

"Hey there sweetheart" Andy said as he walked up to her and kissed her.

"Hey, Andy, what are we doing here?" she asked.

"We're picking up your things so we can move, don't you remember? We have a nice house now. Don't worry, I'm sure your friend can carry all of the heavy things" he said as he motioned through the door. Aldric walked in slowly and nodded to her and then picked up her bed with ease.

"What theâ€¦ careful! You'll hit the models! I have to pack those before-" she stopped as one of the models fell down to the ground slowly, and she noticed it wasn't just a model, but a Black Blade. Just as it hit the groundâ€¦

She suddenly woke up to the sound of the alarm at her door. She shot up from her position of her head lying on her arms on the desk. She looked around and sniffed, blinking. The alarm came again.

"I'll be there in a minute" she said and looked at the clock. 0600 hours. She had stayed awake until 0200. She barely had four hours of sleep. She looked at her terminal which now seemed to have little fighters shooting across it as the screensaver.

She got up wobbly and smoothed back her hair, and straightened her uniform. She then walked to her door and opened it. Dr. Wright stood in front of the door smiling.

"Do you remember the surprise I told you about my dear?" he asked.

"What? Ohâ€¦ yeahâ€¦" she said and blinked some more, then rubbed her eyes.

"I take it you are still tired. When did you get to bed if you don't mind my asking" he said.

"Umâ€¦ I think 0200â€¦ yeah. Sorry, what surprise?" she asked.

"You'll see. The resupply fleet has come to rearm our fleet, and there's something you should see. Are you ready?" he asked.

"Umâ€¦ wellâ€¦ let me take a shower quick and get changedâ€¦ I sort of fell asleep at my desk doing reportsâ€¦ then we can goâ€¦" she said and blinked again.

"Splendid" he responded as she went back inside and took a shower, the hot water waking her up and feeling great against her skin. She waited the full five minutes before the shower turned off, and dried her hair. She then got dressed and stood up, feeling presentable. Elena walked out of her quarters and towards the lift with Dr. Wright in tow.

"Would you, would you care to eat before we go see the surprise?" he asked grinning.

"Huh? Well, I meanâ€¦ I guessâ€¦" she said confused.

"Oh, by the way, Aldric said he won't be able to make it to your dance exercises this morning. He apologizes as he had something else to do" he explained to her.

"Oh, well, ok. I guess I can do them later. Hey, where is everyone?" she asked as they entered the DFAC.

"I believe they're either at their work stations or still resting. Do you need people around while you eat?" he asked inquisitively.

"No, just wondering. You know, we could go to the hangar before this, I don't want to keep you waiting on me" she said.

"Nonsense! We'd probably get in the way right now as their cleaning up some wreckage and getting pumps out of the way in some form. I haven't had my coffee yet either" he said, buying time it seemed. She furrowed her brow and felt confused, then looked back to the counter and grabbed a tray. The cook immediately put a plate of bacon and eggs and hash browns on her tray.

"Wait, we have bacon?" she asked astonished.

"We just received our resupply of perishables. They're still moving some of the equipment and other things onboard, but at least we can eat well. Ah, sir, might I have a cup of the special blend that just came in?" Dr. Wright asked. He smiled and nodded.

"Somebody likes the strong stuff" the cook replied and put a cup on his tray.

"My thanks my boy" Dr. Wright said. Elena looked at the cup and realized he was drinking Turkish coffee.

"Dear god, no wonder I never see you rest. That stuff must keep you up all the time" she said as she looked at the thick sugary sludge in the cup.

"It's an acquired taste somewhat" he grinned and sipped a bit of it. They moved forward and she grabbed a pack of toast, and then picked up some jam and an apple. She also grabbed two cartons of milk, which she was sorely missing. She refused to drink the powdered stuff as her father had once warned her in the past. It still hadn't changed much since she was a kid.

They both walked to a table and sat down as she and Dr. Wright ate in silence, she wolfing down her food as Dr. Wright ate a piece of banana bread and sipped his coffee while reading his data pad. She could barely tell he kept glancing at her grinning.

"Ok, what's with the grin" she asked smirking.

"Nothing, nothing at all my dear. Just hoping you are enjoying your food, which you seem to be doing. You're almost done it looks" he said as he looked over at her tray.

"Yeah, so, I eat like a Spartan, nothing new as you know" she said and rolled her eyes.

"I'm simply saying it's interesting how quickly your metabolism burns through that. Now, are you ready to go?" he asked as he finished his cup of coffee and she put her tray on top of the trashcan. She was much more awake now as they walked to the lift and down to the hangar. More than likely he was able to get her more pilots for her wing as a surprise no doubt.

As they walked into the hangar, she saw just why so few people were around, at least the ones she knew. As she walked in, she saw Aldric, Renee, Buck, Mickey, Dutch, Rookie, Ezekiel, Captain Dare and the other Spartans in two single file lines.

"What is this?" she asked curiously.

"Your new fighter" Dr. Wright said as she looked left. Sitting where her old fighter used to be, was the Black Blade Mk II.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score " You Were Born for This]\*\*

She walked slowly to the fighter, and ran her hand over the side. The entire thing looked to be made of a shining black onyx compared to the matte black of the other Black Blades. The thing looked to have grown larger. The cockpit seemed to fit seamlessly into the fighter, and looked to be a single piece almost. There were four engines now, and the armor seemed to be modified, as a slight blue sheen could be seen at different angles from the light. She could almost see an electrical grid course under the armor. She was astonished at how advanced it looked.

\_Hello. Welcome \_It seemed to say.

"What theâ€¦| no wayâ€¦|" she said as she was almost breathless.

"Congratulations Colonel, the Black Blade Mk II is operational" Dr. Wright told her. She looked back at everyone else as they smiled.

"Come on, take her for a spin" Ezekiel chuckled. She grinned from ear to ear. She then nodded and ran to the changing room and saw her new suit, similar texture to her fighter now. She changed quickly, and walked out with a new helmet. The helmet had entirely done away with any external pieces, looking very similar to a blue visored EVA helmet. Everything was now internal. She could even de-polarize like the ODS helmets.

"Alright boys! Let's get her loaded up!" Ezekiel barked orders to his maintenance crew as Elena walked up the steps. The cockpit opened on cue for her, and she slipped inside.

As soon she sat down and strapped in, the controls woke up as if to say \_I've been waiting for you\_.

She looked around as she felt the connection to her neural lace and her eyes dilated slightly adjusting to the input. Her HUD was far more streamlined, and much, much faster. Weapons load out quickly filled up.

"This is Raven 1-1, getting ready for burnout" she said over the coms to the CIC.

"Copy that Raven 1-1, have fun" she heard. She thought that was an odd thing to say to her, but she smiled. Apparently they knew about the secret too.

"Alright girlie, you're all loaded up" Ezekiel said as he gave her a thumbs up outside. She loaded onto the mag rail and waited. The fighter responded only with a low hum as the reactor power coursed through it. She noticed her defense log stating two different shield emitters, two armor layers, a refractive diamond mesh under it and a nanite auto repair system inside alongside the nano weave armor.



"They really went all out on thisâ€|" she whispered.

"Raven 1-1, prepare to launch" CIC said.

"Copy that" Elena said as the mag rail fired her off into the darkness. She immediately engaged her engines. "Alright, let's take it from the top" she said to herself.

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Adventure of the Skies]\*\*

\_By all means\_ she thought of what the fighter would tell her if it was alive as the power charged to maximum.

The engines came to life immediately, and the fighter rocketed off faster than she expected.

"She's got some kick!" she laughed as she brought it about, the maneuvering thrusters responded without a millisecond of hesitation. She flipped and barrel rolled, testing every which way to move. She was almost impossible to see in the darkness from the look of the fighter, and basic stealth systems were already working.

She shot straight up and was positioned just in front of the view of the sun of the solar system as everybody in the hangar looked out the window to watch. She flipped and shot right by the \_Conundrum\_, testing her speed. She was a true ghost now, as no one could even track her on sensors from the ship.

"CIC, What the fuck was that?" she heard over the coms as someone saw her zip by a window.

She weaved through the fleet as if it was nothing, feeling nothing but the power coursing through the craft.

"Jesus she's not just another pretty face!" she said astonished.

\_Is that all you have to make me do?\_ She seemed to think the fighter was telling her. She laughed and back flipped it and re-engaged the engines, then shot right back to the \_Conundrum\_ in record time. The fighter reacted to her touch at every turn, every button she pressed there was no latency or lagtime.

"Damn, so when do the others come?" Roberts asked.

"Sadly my boy, we were only able to get one up and running so quickly. They're still working on the others due to time constraints, but if anyone deserves that one right there, it's her" Dr. Wright told him.

"Oh well, but yeah you're right, she does deserve it. We can wait till we get our hands on ours" Roberts chuckled as they saw her weave to a landing position on the deck, and effortlessly landed by JTOL and assistance from some anti-gravity nodes on the outside. Elena opened the cockpit and de-polarized her helmet.

"So? What do you think?" Dr. Wright asked as the others ran up to her.

"Incredible. What the hell did you do to this fighter? She's better

than the old one by ten times!" she laughed.

\_I'll always do my best for you.\_

"Implemented newer technology. You should find you're on a much more even playing field with those things outside" he chuckled.

"No kidding!" she said enthusiastically as she looked at everyone and motioned for Dr. Wright to talk to her in private for a minute.

"We'll be right back guys, don't worry" she giggled as everyone nodded or laughed.

"So, all the improvements we talked about? They're inside?" she whispered to him.

"Yes my dear. 50mm Vulcans with the improved ammunition, the gauss cannons have been replaced with rail guns, a completely different technology mind you, and the laser system has been modified into a 1 gigawatt coring laser. It's as strong as the old one, but shields and armor make it even worse. The function of the laser now is the outside of the beam is brighter than the inside, and when it hits the enemy, it produces something similar to a micro black hole, about the equivalent to a nuclear device going off near the enemy." He started to explain. Her mouth fell open.

"The EMP cannon has been installed and is highly useful for taking down shields. Both bays of missiles have had one extra hard point installed so you can have twenty missiles carried. The new P-2 anionic missiles are also available now. The particle cannons are now carried over the back V wings and are kept internally to keep stealth to a maximum. The engines have been upgraded as well as the reactor and secondary generator. Overall, a significant improvement over the older model" he told her.

"She wasn't that old remember? A year tops" she said softly.

"Indeed, but she was already obsolete compared to what you were fighting. She did her job well, but now she's going to be laid to rest. Ah, you're friends are probably waiting, I shouldn't keep you. I have the test log to send off involving your maiden flight. Have a good rest of the day my dear" he said smiling and patted her on the shoulder, then walked out of the hangar. She walked over to the group and talked to them for the better part of an hour.

When they finally had to get back to their duties, Elena got changed out of her flight suit and Renee followed her towards the gym. As they reached the room, Elena looked left and saw someone she never would have expected.

"THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE?" She roared down the hallway. She looked angry as standing in the intersection was Andy in his fire fighter suit.

"Oh shit" he seemed to whisper as two other fire fighters were next to him.

"This isn't good man" one of them said as she stormed over to

them.

"What are you doing here?" she growled out loudly.

"Look, I can explain" he said putting his hands up in defense.

"This better be a damned good explanation" she said fiercely as she glared daggers at him.

"Elena, we were brought as a fire measure for Sangheilios, to help them re-learn civic duties, you know, policing and firefighting and ambulances? There are multiple groups on different ships, we got this one" he said.

"Uh uh, this shit ain't floating. You go back on to the support ship and get back to Earth" she ordered him.

"Sheesh she's bossy" one of the other fire fighters said.

"And who the fuck are you?" she barked at him.

"Fire Chief Reilos, and I'm the one who volunteered the station to assist. He's following orders" he growled.

"Well guess what Fire Chief Reilos, those orders are going to be rescinded and you get to go back on your merry way to San Francisco" she growled.

"Under whose authority?" he said as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Mine. I'm a Colonel on this ship, and I have quite a bit of control over what happens here. If I wanted to I'd have you thrown out the airlock without your suit or in the brig. Do you understand me? Now fuck off while I talk to my fiancÃ©" she growled, and somehow, the chief knew she'd do it. He backed off away from them as she looked at Andy.

"Hey, I'm following orders here Elena, calm down. It won't be so bad, I thought you wanted to see me as well not yell at me" he said confused.

"I want to see you back on Earth! Not out here! This is a war zone Andy! Not for civilians!" she yelled in his face.

"And I'm doing my job right now! Elena, what, you think I'm gonna be hurt out here? We're on the strongest ship in the fleet!" he argued back.

"You seem to think you know everything do you? We just got attacked multiple times in the past few days, still think we're safe?" she asked. He was silent for a few seconds.

"Iâ€¦ well what about you? You go out there each day fighting! How do you think I feel?" he asked annoyed.

"That's different! I'm a fighter pilot! It's my job!" she told him.

"And it's my job to suppress fires and save innocent lives near them.

Look, we're helping allies. We're out here to do a job, afterwards we go home. I thought you'd be happy to see me here. We're together right now, aren't you at least enjoying part of that?" he asked. Elena looked beaten.

"Wellâ€¦ yeah, butâ€¦" she trailed off thinking of the words.

"Then be happy I'm here. Once it's all done we can all go home from what I've heard. I thought it would be interesting as an early Christmas present" he said smiling. His smile disarmed her quickly.

"Andyâ€¦ I'm justâ€¦ I'm worried something is gonna happen to youâ€¦" she said.

"Nothing is going to happen to me. We'll be under armed escort the entire time down there, and while we're here we have nothing to worry about. Nothing. You worry far too much Elena. Trust me" he told her and cupped her face. She placed her hand on top of his hand and looked into his eyes. She was happy to see him, though didn't want him to be in danger out there.

"You promise?" she asked.

"Pinkie swear" he chuckled and brought his pinkie finger up for her to wrap her own around. She did it, and then hugged him.

"It's really good to see you Elenaâ€¦" he whispered in her ear.

"It's good to see you too Andyâ€¦" she whispered back. He pulled away from her and held her hands.

"Hey, we're going to be assigned quarters soon as we just got on board" he told her.

"No you aren't. You're staying in my quarters. That's final" she told him.

"Ok ok, you win on that" he chuckled.

"I guess we're heading on our own then. Catch you later Birken" the other two fire fighters said as they walked by holding their packs.

"Yeah, later" he said as they looked at each other. They shared a quick kiss as they walked back down the hallway.

"You could have warned me before you came here, it would have been less of a shock if I had some advanced info" she told him poking his chest.

"I didn't know until after we were getting into the pelican. Oh, I got a pack of your favorite from Amber, in case I saw you up above. She still doesn't know your way out here" he told her. He pulled out a small package. Elena opened it to find two dozen white chip macadamia nut cookies inside of it.

"Gotta hand it to her, she remembers everybody's favorite food" she giggled.

"No kidding right? She gave me some magic bars. Oh, she and Greg have postponed the wedding until you get back. She wants to tell you something also later" he said.

"Oh, well I'll have to call her then" she said.

"You can't call her way out here" he said looking at her as if she had grown a third eye.

"UNSC has better communication than you think Andy" she grinned "how do you think I talked to you out here?" she asked. He looked surprised.

"You mean youâ€¦ out here?" he asked as his eyes went wide.

"Yup. Advancements in communication. I don't do it that often for security reasons, but that timeâ€¦ I justâ€¦ I had to see you, you know?" she looked up into his eyes and smiled.

"Yeah, I was really happy to see you too hon" he said softly. They shared another kiss and then she broke away.

"Have you eaten yet? Cause if so, you're dropping your things in my quarters and then we're getting you something." His stomach growled.

"We've beenâ€¦ hey, I never told you how we got here so quick did I?" he asked. Now that she thought about it, she was wondering about that.

"Yeah, now that you mention it, it takes a month to get here at least. How did youâ€¦" she asked curious.

"Apparently they had already tested it and it worked with no adverse effects beyond blowing both slip space drives, but if they carry two spares, then what they can do is use one drive to get us into slip space, and then another created a sort ofâ€¦ well, worm hole or whatever. I'm not a scientist, but I saw how fast we got here with no gravity problems or anything. Both of the drives are blown to hell, but they brought replacements to be mounted for the return trip. It's slightly costly though I'd guess" he told her.

"But worth it if you're resupplying a large fleet out beyond our normal chains. I think they'd be fine with losing some drives to keep from having the fleet turn around each time" she replied.

"True, I never thought about that" he said and looked up at the ceiling.

"I'm a Colonel remember? These things fly through my head all the time" she chuckled and led him to the lift.

"Sheesh, you must know where everything is on this ship" he said.

"I have to. Just in case something were to happen to an officer in the area, I may at any point take over, though I don't know much about engineering for the ship, I can repair and refuel all the fighters here, I know the manuals by heart, and can technically command this ship even though that's not my assigned job" she told

him.

"Wow, so, you can order people everywhere?" he asked.

"I don't usually do that, just my wing. Captain Dare handles the ship, I handle my wing, Commander Derden handles Cougar squadron and Commander Aizen commands Raptor squadron. I could technically pull rank, but it wouldn't be useful. I have enough to worry about with just my subordinates" she told him.

"You could order me around if you wanted to" he slyly responded and winked, then grabbed her ass.

"Hey, I'm still on duty right now Andy, calm down" she giggled as the lift opened and they walked out to her quarters. He threw his bags down on the ground and took his heavy ANSI III jacket off and took his boots off. Elena looked at him with a cocked eyebrow as he took his pants off.

"What?" he asked with a grin on his face.

"That doesn't mean what I think it means does it?" she asked with a smirk crossing her face.

"Well, I'm getting out of my work clothes and into some more comfortable attire so we can go eat. Why, what did you think it meant?" he said as a devilish grin came over his mouth.

"My lips are sealed" she said as she made a zipping motion on her mouth.

"Really?" he said surprised as he stood up in just his underwear and a t-shirt and pulled her close.

"Uhuh" she acknowledged as he got closer for another kiss.

"Do they open for this?" he asked as he kissed her lips.

"Well, maybe for that" she said seductively. He kissed her again and again.

"I thought you were hungry?" she asked as he broke away slowly.

"I am, but this sort of took priority in my brain" he told her and chuckled.

"Which brain I wonder?" she said as she picked up the pair of pants he laid on the bed and handed them to him.

"My lips are sealed on that" he said and zipped his mouth. She laughed.

"Come on fire boy, let's get your stomach full of some grub" she said as he put on his jeans and some sneakers.

"Is this ok?" he asked as she looked him over.

"You're a civvie, you wear whatever you want to wear" she told him.

"If I was military, I'd have to wear some regulation stuff?" he asked.

"Yup. You don't see any dresses in my closet do you?" she asked as he looked confused and went to her closet. It was only half full with two dress uniforms and four casual uniforms. The remainder of her shirts and underwear and cargo pants were in the dresser.

"Huh, simple" he said.

"It makes cleaning easy and makes it not that difficult to figure out what to wear. Come on, stop wondering if those pants make your hips look fat and let's go get you something to eat" she chuckled.

"Yes dear" he complied and followed her to the door.

"Practicing are we?" she asked.

"I can tell you'll be wearing half the pants in the family" he laughed.

"You can wear the pants, I'll wear the Kevlar skirts" she told him. He laughed again as they both walked out of her quarters and to the lift.

(Author's Note: So Andy has gotten on board and Aldric is a no go. Oh well, not everybody wants a Spartan for a boyfriend. Elena isn't so invincible is she? Caught off guard and nearly killed by an advanced fighter. Eh, she's got a new craft now. Does the fighter have a built in new generation AI? Hmm, that's an interesting questionâ€|Please review!)

## 18. Cleaning House

\*\*[0600 hours, December 19\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ En route to unknown location]\*\*

Elena had spent the rest of the previous day showing Andy around the ship to areas he was allowed in, and introducing him to other people. He remembered Ezekiel, but the others were a mystery. During the entire time they were together, she was still being sent reports by her subordinates. There were a few times when Andy and she were alone together only to have someone come up with a data pad for her eyes only.

Elena woke up at her normal time with Andy still asleep with his arm draped over her. She enjoyed having him with her despite still being fearful of something happening to him. She would just have to take extra care to make sure nothing bad came upon him.

She got on her sweats and slipped out of her quarters silently to go to the gym. Aldric was waiting for her, and they did some dance exercises and a few songs together.

"I noticed your fiancÃ© is on board" he told her as she finished the last move.

"Yeah, it was a surprise too" she told him.

"Did he join the military or something?" he asked.

"No, his station was volunteered by his fucking fire chief to go to Sangheilios to teach the Sangheili about certain civic duties they had forgotten. Since they've been warriors their entire lives, certain aspects have disappeared and they've forgotten over the centuries. They are going there with other groups to help them relearn how to support themselves" she told him as she picked up a towel.

"Hmmm, is that wise? To help them rebuild like that with civilians" he asked worried.

"I don't know, I have fears of what might happen as well." She looked at the floor with multiple thoughts roaming through her mind. Andy could be caught by rebels, kidnapped and tortured. He could be killed in a suicide bombing move, or a fire set by them. Hundreds of things could happen to him down at the planet.

"For what it's worth, I don't wish any harm to come to him either. If it did, I know you'd be crushed, and the last thing I want to see is that" he told her.

"Aldric, I thought-" she started.

"I'm not flirting, I'm just saying." She looked at him as he patted his face down with a towel.

"Well, hopefully that won't happen. He's going with an armed escort so, it shouldn't be a problem" she told him.

"Yeah, I heard about that. Renee's squad is watching out for him and his teammates. Sergeant Buck actually has to watch out for a group of doctors" he said.

"I hope she doesn't shoot his fire chiefâ€¦ that guy is such an asshole" she growled.

"I had a chance to see him. He does not like Spartans" he told her and rolled his eyes.

"I don't think he likes anyone" she replied as she picked up her towel and they walked out of the gym.

"Hey, I should go wake up sleeping beauty. I'll catch you in the DFAC" she told him and he nodded. She went up the lift and to her quarters and silently entered. She found a large lump hidden under the covers. She smirked and went to take a shower, and then dried her hair and brushed her teeth. As she exited her bathroom she noticed the lump had changed positions on the bed.

"Wakey wakey sleepy head" she said. The lump moved again. She heard a small groan as Andy's head poked out from under the covers and looked around.

"Oh, what time is it?" he asked groggily and looked at the alarm clock.

"Time to get up for breakfast" she told him.



"It's seven o'clock, too early" he grumbled and tried to shove his head under the covers like a turtle.

"Do fire fighters normally sleep in?" she asked as she sat down on her bed next to him and poked him once.

"Only when we are on vacation. This is deemed a vacation since we can't do anything in slip space right?" he asked.

"Maybe, but wouldn't you rather spend time with me while you can? We'll be at Sangheilios before you know it, and then I won't be with you" she softly said as she shook him gently. He poked his head out from the covers and looked at her confused.

"What do you mean you won't be? oh" he suddenly realized she would be in the air.

"Yeah, I'll be above you, way above you" she softly giggling.

"I'll be able to see you above me right?" he asked.

"WAY above you. Like, not even entering the atmosphere above you. You won't even know where I am above the planet hon. Remember, I still have my duty to uphold" she told him.

"Damn! alright, alright I'm up. Lemme go take a shower" he said as he got up and scratched his chest through his t-shirt. He tried to give Elena a kiss, but she pushed him away with one finger.

"Brush first, mouthwash after, then kiss" she told him as she wrinkled her nose. He looked confused and breathed into a cupped hand, trying to smell his own breath.

"That bad?" he asked.

"Sleep breath is always bad" she told him and got up. He slid out of bed and went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, and then walked out and hugged her from behind while she checked the menu for the DFAC. She returned the hug as she cradled his arms with her own, and he then was allowed to kiss her.

"Much better. You haven't taken a shower yet though" she told him.

"What a cruel taskmaster you are mother" he rolled his eyes and let go, and then did a few pushups and some sit ups.

"You know we have a gym for that" she snickered.

"Just some quick wake up exercises, I might hit the gym later, get my body back into some really decent shape" he told her. He already was in fairly decent shape, however after seeing the Spartans she noticed a slight change in him, as he wanted to get even stronger. It must have been seeing even the Spartan women muscled.

"You could have come with me to the gym this morning, I did some dancing" she nagged.

"Salsa dancing? Ooh, that would have been something to see. I could have tried to clumsily be your partner" he chuckled.

"Actually I have a partner on board. A Spartan actually. His name is Aldric" she told him as she looked at the time.

"Aldric? A Spartan dancing?" he asked quizzically.

"Yup. He does ballet. He's really sweet, and very gentle, not what you expect from a pile of muscle" she giggled. He furrowed his brow and looked at the bathroom as if wondering.

"That's interesting, how long have you been dancing with him?" he asked.

"Mmmm, a few days, he's in my wing now" she told him as he went into the bathroom to take a shower. He then came out and brushed his hair back and put his clothes on. She chuckled and watched him don his pants and shoes.

"Come on, you can meet him. Are you ready?" she asked. He nodded and they headed out of her quarters and walked down the hallway, and then headed into the lift and finally to the DFAC. The middle table already had Buck and his ODSs sitting with him, and Renee and John were in a corner table alone to their thoughts. The other Spartans were nowhere to be seen except for Aldric and two others that she didn't know about.

"Hmmm, must be his old team" she guessed and got in line at the counter. Andy quickly followed as Elena piled her tray while he barely had a quarter of what she ate. Aldric waved at her.

"He seems friendly" Andy said and Elena couldn't figure out if he was jealous or if he was just pointing it out.

"Yeah, he really is" she said and waved to him. She pointed at Andy and put her hand up to show the ring, and Aldric nodded and waved at Andy. He returned the wave.

"Yup, definitely friendly. I guess I'm ok with you dancing with him" he chuckled.

"You better be, cause if you weren't, I'd have to stop" she chuckled.

"Oh you don't have to do that. I'm ok with it as long as it doesn't turn into something weird. How does that old song go? "Don't forget whose taking you home or in whose arms you're gonna be! Cause darling save that last dance for me!" he sang. Elena laughed as she remembered the song he played once, Save the last dance for me. Others looked at him oddly and he chuckled. Aldric chuckled as he heard it and nodded to him.

"I'll always save the last dance for you Andy" she said coyly as she picked up some jam. He winked at her and she winked back. He looked at her tray compared to his.

"I completely forgot about how much you eat" he laughed as she picked up a pack of toast and a double helping of bacon.

"So? I'm not fat, am I?" she asked as she looked down at her hips and then up to him.

"No no, not at all, I just forgot you eat so much. I never did understand how your metabolism can burn through all that. You never ate this much until after you came back from wherever you were during the Battle of Earth" he explained.

"Well, I'm a hearty eater. Be glad I don't become some fat slob" she stuck her tongue out at him and picked up a pack of yogurt.

They went to another middle table next to the Hell Jumpers as Renee and John waved at her. She waved back and pointed at Andy. Renee looked at John and nudged him, and he scooted out of the booth he was in to let her out and they both walked over.

"Hey, Andy, this is Sergeant Renee Kilburn and John. Renee, John, this is my fianc~@ Andy Birken" Elena introduced them. They both said hello

"Hey hey, what about us guys over here?" Buck asked pointing at himself.

"Ah, yes, the meatheads. Andy, that's Sergeant Edward Buck, that's Private First Class Michael Crespo but we call him Mickey, Corporal Taylor H. Miles but we call him Dutch, and that one is Lance Corporal Kojo Agu but we call him Romeo. Guys, this is my fianc~@ Andy Birken" she introduced them and they waved.

"So this is the guy you fell head over heels for" Buck chuckled.

"I didn't fall head over heels for him Eddy, we've known each other for a while" she glared at him and smirked.

"Ah, I see, so his charms were perpetual. Wearing down your steely pilot professionalism. Good work" Buck said to Andy.

"I did my best to snag a hot one" he chuckled. Elena nudged him and he laughed. Renee and John sat down with them.

"Oh, I forgot, I have an audio log from Amber for you. Don't know what she said cause we didn't know you have such advanced communications, so she just recorded her voice mail for you" he said as he pulled out a data pad and handed it to her.

"Hey there fly girl! Just seeing how you're doing! Hey! How come you don't say hello often enough? You forgetting about your best friend up there? I still need you down here as my Maid of Honor damn it! That's right! I chose you! Happy now? And eat those cookies I baked for you! I finally opened that restaurant and it's hard as heck to empty it with so many customers coming in now. Guess I have a knack for being a chef. Look, I won't keep you obviously as Andy is most likely with you from hearing this, but I just have one request! Since you guys are more than likely doing the nasty there after being away from each other so long, you better enjoy your time together! Hot freaky monkey sex! That's right! You grind on him girl! And Andy make use of your tongue often! She'll like that while you hit her-" she turned off the data pad.

"Request denied. I think we've heard enough of the peanut gallery's suggestions for one week" Elena suddenly said, looking extremely embarrassed as her face went red and she blinked quickly. Buck's team

tried to stifle their laughing.

"One word about this and I have you guys thrown out an airlock" she pointed at the Hell Jumpers. They put their hands up in defense while smiling, shaking their heads.

"We won't, we promise, even if we hear monkey noises" Buck said as they continued to laugh.

"Andy, dear, remind me when we get back to kill my best friend" Elena said as she turned to her fianc .

"I think that would hamper her wedding, but ok" he chuckled.

"She can be a bride in a coffin after that" Elena snickered.

"A corpse bride. How original" he replied grinning. Renee chuckled and John just smirked.

"Hey, I just realized! You don't know yet!" Elena suddenly perked up and told Andy.

"What? What'd I miss?" he asked.

"I'll show you. Finish your food quick" she told him and Renee cocked an eyebrow. Elena looked at her and mouthed the word "Medical Bay" and she immediately knew where they were going. Andy looked between the two women and shook his head in confusion.

"Ok, what is it" he asked as he scarfed his food down.

"Not saying. It's a surprise" she told him with her nose in the air.

"Oh really?" he said as he started to tickle her. She giggled and laughed trying to stop his hands from prodding her body.

"Stop stop stop!" she laughed as he stopped.

"Ready to tell me?" he asked smiling. She looked at him with a hint of rebelliousness in her eyes.

"Not until we're there. Do your worst!" she said in a mock British accent. He continued to tickle her as she tried to stop him.

"Ok, ok, you win!" she suddenly said as she took deep breathes from laughing. Others were looking at them in amusement.

"You two are like kids" Buck rolled his eyes and chuckled.

"It's called being carefree Eddy, you should try it once in a while" she grinned at him as Andy looked over her shoulder at him. Buck just scoffed and chuckled.

"I tried that missy, a long time ago. Veronica kind of beat it out of me and I got older. Still, we sometimes do that" he told her. Elena chuckled.

"Come on, I should show you" Elena said as she got up.

"You still haven't told me what it is" Andy cocked his eyebrows and grinned.

"It's a clone. Of me. Yes, you can have two of me attached to your arms now" she lied.

"May god help me then, I can barely keep up with one of you. Two of you will send me to an early grave" he joked. Everyone else laughed as she gawked and poked him in the ribs. He laughed as she returned tickle fire against him as he scrunched his arms close to his body.

"Ok you two, take it somewhere private" John suddenly said to calm them down.

"Oh John, you're no fun" Elena smirked and looked at him.

"Only when we're in a public area Colonel" he told her and returned the smirk. He winked at her and she winked back, and then Elena and Andy got up and put their trays on top of the trashcan and walked out towards the medical bay.

"Okay, what is it really?" he asked.

"You'll see. You'll find it amazing" she told him. They both walked into the medical bay and into the room on the right. Inside, laying on the bed, was her father. Andy gawked in amazement as Jack did the same.

"No way! He's alive? Well how are you doing sir!" he said as he walked forward with his hand outstretched to shake Jack's hand. Jack took it and shook it as hard as he could manage in his weakened state and smiled.

"I'm not doing too good Andy, but I'll be much better soon. They've already started the nutrient injections to rebuild my muscles" he said.

"Really? That's great dad! I guess the rehab will be soon won't it then?" Elena asked.

"Apparently the repairs to my muscles was an average, some react better to the treatments, some act worse. Apparently one guy a long time ago took six months for the nutrient injections to take effect. I've only had a day and I can at least lift my arms without them hurting. I still need to use the damned urinals instead of going to the bathroom. I want to get better simply to stop doing that" he explained. Elena smiled and hugged him gently.

"I'm glad to hear that dad" she whispered.

"What happened?" Andy asked as he sat down.

\*\*[One hour later]\*\*

Jack had explained how he was held captive and used as a remote pilot for transports in the rebel cause for the Sangheili, and how Elena had helped rescue him while a stealth team snuck in and pulled him out. Andy was in pure amazement. He had no idea that her father had gone through so much.

"Wowâ€¦ I am so sorry that happened to you, but it's definitely a miracle you're here. It's really good you're back sir" Andy said with a huge grin on his face.

"I'm glad to be back Andy. Elena, I noticed the ring on your finger" he asked as he looked down at her hand.

"Yes, we're engaged. You'll definitely be walking me down the aisle dad" she smiled and his eyes lit up.

"Then I need to make sure I'm ship shape to do that don't I? Andy, I know you'll take good care of her" he said to Andy.

"You know it sir. I'll always be there for her" he said as he looked at Elena and her at him, and reached to hold each other's hands.

"Then obviously I give a father's blessing to you. Let me guess, your mother is expecting grandkids?" he smiled. Elena's eyes went wide and she looked at Andy. He wagged his eyebrows at her and snickered.

"Well, that isn't quite yet in the cards, but who knows? Wellâ€¦ I mean, you don't have to worry about-" she explained.

"Elena, you're what, twenty four now? I can't expect you to have not experimented up until now, I just hope you understand how precious your body is. All a father can do is teach you and hope you understand to be careful-" Jack told her.

"Dad. Dad! We haven't experimented yet! No experimenting has happened! I'm waiting until we're married!" she told him trying to stop him from spouting embarrassing things.

"Oh, well, thank god you said that when you did. I did not want to go through that speech that all fathers seem to think they have to giveâ€¦ weight off my shouldersâ€¦" he suddenly sighed and relaxed. They both giggled.

"Colonel Gripen call the bridge" they heard.

"Oh god, we're in slip space, what nowâ€¦" she grumbled and excused herself as Andy talked to Jack. She walked over to a terminal and accessed a direct line to the bridge.

"Elena? This is Dare" she heard.

"Hey, what's up Veronica?" she asked using her first name.

"I have some interesting news. You definitely want to hear this" Dare started.

"This isn't about more alien fighters is it? Because I don't think I want to test the new fighter in a slip space battle" Elena interrupted.

"No, it's not. Thank god it's not. We're not going to Sangheilios. The Jiralhanae have tried to invade Sangheili space. Both fleets are reacting. We're heading to the front lines immediately. We don't know

what we'll find, but we'll be joined by a smaller Sangheili fleet there of about twenty ships. Once there, we need to protect a colony they have. It's somewhat bad news though. The colony has no defenses. It was never perceived that a war would happen on their home turf. We should expect the worst" Veronica told her. Elena nodded and looked through the glass doors to her father and Andy.

"Alright, I'll notify my squadron. So what happens to the civilians on board?" she asked softly.

"They stay on board as temporary guests. Once we have the borders under control, we'll head to Sangheilios and continue with the original mission objective" Dare told her. Elena sighed nervously.

"I take it you are worried Andy is walking into a war zone?" she asked.

"More than you know. Veronica, what do you feel when Buck drops feet first into hell?" Elena asked. Veronica thought for a moment.

"Worry, but I push it to the back of my mind. He knows what he's doing. He's well trained and will do his best to not only get himself out alive, but everyone under his command. You should feel similarly to Andy. He's a fire fighter. He runs into burning buildings Elena. That takes some courage, probably even more than Buck even has. It takes guts to go against a superior alien threat, but it takes some amazing bravery to charge into a fire to save lives. You should feel honored to know him" Dare assured her.

"I am honored, but I still worry one day he might not come back from one of those" she explained to Veronica.

"And he probably feels the same way towards you. It's the price we pay for defending humanity in our own ways. Now, enough with this talk, I'm on the bridge and shouldn't be saying this stuff up here. Just make sure you get your squadron prepared. They'll be doing most of the footwork down below again, as those alien fighters you'll have to keep an eye out for. No glory for you sadly girl" Dare said sympathetically.

"Dr. Wright told me well, I don't know if I should be telling you this promise you can keep this secret?" Elena asked.

"I'm an ONI specialist Elena. Secrets is what I breathe, and we are on the same side despite being in different branches" Dare chuckled.

"He thinks they're precursors. The race the forerunners tried to find? Remember those briefings we had about forerunner technology and their technology advancement tier?" Elena asked.

"Yeah, I remember. I thought the Precursors was their form of gods or something. So they're real huh? Well that makes sense except they're not benevolent creatures are they?" Dare said.

"No, they aren't it seems. We don't even know if it's true or not, could be some unknown race, but the facts fit. However, I wonder why they are so hostile to us" Elena asked confused.

"Maybe it's Forerunner technology. Maybe they hate forerunners and feel humans are second to them. Maybe they just hate all life and are xenophobic. The list goes on. Unless we got a chance to question one or get a hold of their history logs in some form, we'll never know" Dare answered.

"Hmm, good point. Well, I'll let you get back to command" Elena said.

"Oh, one other thing. I heard through the grapevine that one of your pilots, a Lieutenant Reist I believe; she's been moping around apparently. Severely depressed in some form. Obviously from what I saw of her it wasn't much of a change from her being shy, but still, might want to figure out what's going on with her Colonel. Dare out" Veronica said and turned off the com connection.

Elena sighed and shook her head. She walked back into the medical room.

"Hey, duty calls and I have to go be a Colonel. Andy, you know your way to the gym and to my quarters now right?" she asked. He nodded.

"Ok. If you have any problems, you can always ask someone nearby for directions. I'll ask Milo to come by so you can have a guy's day in here or something to talk" she explained.

"Milo is here too?" Andy asked astonished.

"Yup, and before you ask, he didn't cut himself off from us, he was out on the field and couldn't get word back to us a lot of the time. He isn't how you remember him when we were younger. He's in Renee's squad. I'll see if I can't find him so you guys can talk" she said smiling.

"Wow, would have never expected. He's a marine. Impressive" Andy said almost to himself.

"Yup. Now, I have to go, take care ok?" she said and kissed Andy.

"You too. I'll see you at lunch?" he asked.

"Mmmm, sadly I don't know. More than likely I have to get my squad up and organized so I'll be having a briefing lunch in. Dinner definitely though. Hope you can survive without me until then" she giggled and winked.

"Hmmm, I guess I will have to survive without you. Hey, Jack, you said you were into football right?" Andy asked.

"Are you kidding me? I used to play it when I was in highschool! I watched it whenever I could get my hands on a game recorded" Jack replied.

"We won't have any problems with you working honey" he suddenly said as they got into a huge conversation involving football.

"Ugh, men" she laughed and walked out of the medical bay. Elena



continued down the hallway and to a lift. She stopped on the 29th deck and continued on towards a sim room. She already saw Sarah's neural beacon showing up on her eyes HUD.

She walked in silently to sim room one and saw Sarah in a pod alone as she continued to dodge incoming rounds. She continued to do this for quite a few minutes before she saw herself destroyed. She sighed and almost whimpered.

"Why am I so spineless?" she whispered to herself. Elena got the idea. She was trying to force some courage into herself by fighting back in the sim pod. She mostly dodged and led attacks, using herself as a decoy. She was extremely good at it, but she hardly returned fire unless nothing noticed her, and flew similarly to other pilots, though no stunts like Elena did.

Elena could see tears falling from her eyes as she started another sim training scenario, and Elena slid up near her and watched. Her reactions to most enemies were one of fear. She would engage quickly with whatever she could lock onto with the longest range, and once she had woken the enemy up, she seemed to spend the rest of the scenario dodging and evading rounds. When something wasn't fighting her, she'd fire at it while its back was turned, but that was hardly ever. The AI fighters were far more aggressive, as a good amount of time even if she tried to attack they'd bleed speed or turn to get away and try and get behind her, which was what any other pilot would do.

"I can't! I can't!" she seemed to cry softly.

"Can't do what?" Elena spoke up behind her. Sarah flipped around quickly looking at her with wide eyes. She hadn't heard her come in.

"C-Colonel! I didn't! I didn't know you came in!" she couldn't find the words.

"What's wrong Sarah? You seem to fly well enough. Tell me what's on your mind" she said as she tried to show a comforting smile. Sarah blushed.

"I don't know! I just! I don't know what's wrong with me! I'm afraid to fight!" she almost whispered.

"Why? You're a very strong pilot, and woman. You just have to make them fear you more than you fear them. Here. Start another scenario. I'm right here" she said as Sarah hesitated, then turned around and started a scenario. Elena sat on the edge of the pod and looked over her shoulder. Sarah blushed again as she noticed Elena being close to her.

"What's wrong? You seem to blush a lot when I'm nearby" Elena asked.

"What? Oh! I just! um! I blush when I'm embarrassed!" she said and blushed again, far deeper now that she told her.

"What are you embarrassed about? Come on, you can tell me, I swear I won't tell anyone else. You can trust me" Elena reassured her.

"Wellâ€¦ umâ€¦ when someone sees what I doâ€¦ or ifâ€¦ if I'm complemented on somethingâ€¦ I just don't know how to respond to being noticedâ€¦ Iâ€¦ everytime when I was noticed in the pastâ€¦ something bad would happenâ€¦" she told her and tears welled up in her eyes.

"Hey, nothing bad is going to happen alright? That was the past, this is now. Look, I know about your past. It's in your file I got to read. You're a grown woman. Guys just won't do that to you, most guys anyways. You are stronger than you think. Hell, look at me. You want to know a secret?" she said to Sarah.

"Umâ€¦ what?" she asked.

"Promise you won't tell anyone? I promise I won't tell them about your past" she asked.

"Yes, I promise. You can trust me" she smiled.

"When I was thirteen I was allowed on board the Honor Bound. I thought it was incredible. I got to fly a pelican, I was on a military ship and I wasn't in the military, I wasn't even out of school. And I guess I pissed off this one pilot in a video game. Well, I was in the gym on my own with Spartan 117, the Master Chief in the high gravity area, and the pilot and two others came along" Elena told her.

"Whatâ€¦ what happened?" Sarah asked.

"They got into an argument with me, and when I backed off and tried to leave, they grabbed me. Sarah, they already made mention of their intentions. They were going to rape me" she told her seriously. Sarah looked at her wide eyed.

"Didâ€¦ did theyâ€¦ are you like me?" she asked as she felt a kindred spirit.

"No, they never got the chance. The Master Chief took them all out before they could do anything. Later, I rebuilt my confidence with some help from friends and family. Now, I know you don't really have family right now, except you sort of do. Me" she said and ruffled Sarah's hair. She giggled and grabbed her head, and Elena smiled.

"See? I'm your commander, but this squadron is your new family. They won't screw with you, you're like their sister. No one fucks with family you understand? It works both ways. Others watch your back, and you watch their backs. Out there in the skies, you have to take them on to finish them off, or they will hurt people you care about. You don't want that do you?" she asked. Sarah shook her head quickly.

"That's what I figured. Ok, start the scenario."

Sarah put her hands on the controllers and the mission started. She flew out quickly and fired as far as she could again, but the enemy gave chase after one of them was hit and she again dodged to stay away.

"If you don't attack, they'll kill me" she whispered in her ear. Sarah immediately made a hard right and came right at another fighter, opening up with her cannons as she heard it. The fighter blew up and she continued.

"They could attack anyone on this ship" she continued. The Lieutenant bled her speed and came up behind another fighter and got a lock.

"Now look. You just took on three fighters by yourself. You didn't do any stunts like I do, but you flew by the book and took them out aggressively. That means you aren't spineless. You just need to stand up and be counted. Remember your past, but fight for the present. We're your family." Elena keyed in some command codes to the sim pod and multiple ally fighters came up on the screen. Sarah stopped the mission and stared at the AI alliance fighters. She looked up at Elena and blinked.

"Thank you" she whispered and almost jumped out of the sim pod and hugged Elena. Elena now knew Sarah didn't in fact have feelings towards her, but she worried what her commander felt about her.

"Hey, the only thing I'm ever going to expect from you is to fly well, do your job, and stay alive. I'll never ask for anything beyond that ok? Don't be afraid. Anybody who does try to intimidate you, remember you aren't alone. Ok? This family won't let crap happen to you" she softly said as she hugged her back.

"I'm sorry I'm doing this ma'amâ€¦ Iâ€¦" she tried to pull away and seemed to be very softly crying.

"Don't be sorry. It's fine. I'm easy going. I guess, well, I'm your big sister in a way. I'll be hard on you sometimes while on duty, but you can talk to me too. Remember when I thought I found out about my father? I cried the whole night. Locked myself away and wouldn't talk to anyone. I felt like crap the whole time. Take my advice and talk when you can. Tends to take a lot of weight off your shoulders" she explained.

"Ok ma'am. I will. Thank you" Sarah sniffled.

"Hey, everybody already calls me by my first name Sarah, about time you did that off duty ok?" she patted her on the shoulder.

"Alright Elena. I will."

"Good. Now, how long have you been in this sim pod?" Elena asked curiously.

"Umâ€¦ six hours?" she guessed.

"Hmmm, you go get something to eat right now ok? Take care of yourself. You already proved you can do this, no point in trying to prove yourself anymore. You already did. That's an order" Elena commanded.

"Yes ma'am" Sarah complied and saluted her. Elena saluted back and smiled.

"Go on, go relax and get something in your stomach" she said and Sarah nodded and walked out smiling. Elena sighed and thought of what she needed to do next. She got up and checked her HUD again. Merricks was two floors above. She walked out of the room and into the lift. She walked out and down the hallway towards where her next pilot was. She rang the door buzzer. She could see Merricks move quickly somehow and towards one spot in his room by the icon moving around inside, and then he went to the door and opened it.

"Oh, Colonel, ma'am" he said and saluted her.

"At ease Lieutenant, just checking up on my squadron. How are you doing?" she asked.

"Good ma'am. Um, was there something else you needed?" he said as if he was trying to keep himself blocking her view. She narrowed her eyes and turned on her x-ray lenses. Behind him there wasn't anyone else in the room, but his terminal was on and showing blueprints of the Black Blade Mk I. She deactivated her lenses as the x-ray vision, though a useful tool, tended to give her headaches.

"Lieutenant, would you mind stepping aside for me?" she asked. He hesitated, and then almost closed his eyes in resigned fate. He backed away and she could clearly see the blueprints on the screen.

"Ma'am, I can explain, I know we aren't supposed to have the blueprints modified unless brought to you, but I justâ€¦" he trailed off as he figured he was going to be reprimanded.

"I never put any restrictions on the blueprint data Lieutenant. Do the other squadrons do that?" she asked.

"Well, yes ma'am. It's to stop pilots from sending a new design and confusing the maintenance crews with parts that shouldn't be on the craft. Parts that could potentially not function properly and get the pilot killed, or remove a component they seem inadequate and replace it with something that they want, despite it not being a standard configuration and not being authorized to be in use. Disobeying orders and superseding the commanding officer ma'am" he explained, and then realized what he said and shut his big mouth.

"So I'm supposed to punish you for this?" she asked. He took a deep breath and stood at attention.

"Yes ma'am, or at least the other squadrons do that ma'am" he said and waited for the yelling spree she would commence on him.

"So what are you modifying?" she asked and looked over the blueprint changes he made.

"Ma'am?" he asked confused.

"I asked what did you change? I see the particle cannons there, fine. I already authorized that, but it stops you from carrying any missiles in your bays. The spare power requirements take up a crosslink generator that's placed in the missiles carriage, which stops any explosive ordinance firing. The particle cannons are slow firing as well. What else though?" she asked. Merricks had forgotten about that. The particle cannons effectively replaced all missile

carrying capacity for the fighter. The Black Blade Mk II had eliminated this requirement for a spare generator installed by having its own reactor and an upgraded main generator as well as two emergency power cells.

"Iâ€| hadn't thought about that ma'am. The other modifications are mainly to the main armament. I wanted to replace the gauss cannons" he told her.

"With what? Oh, I seeâ€| two more Vulcans and two modular grenade launchers? Spray and pray?" she asked.

"It's not what you think ma'am. We're going to be under atmosphere from what it looks like. Ground support is going to be needed. I'll still be effective with that armament. The spare ammunition can fit in the little bit left in the missiles carriage where the spare generator doesn't take up room. The way I see it ma'am, a suppression fighter" he explained.

"We already have those Lieutenant. They're called Vultures" she pointed out.

"But those are slow moving ground support craft that have difficulty still re-engaging in dog fights ma'am. I'd still be able to handle those" he commented.

"The only way you could make that work is ifâ€| you haven't installed them yet have you? The Scatter pack missile launchers?" she asked as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"I was in the middle of working that into the blueprint ma'am. The way I saw you use them I figured I could-" he tried to explain.

"What I use those launchers for is entirely different from what you should use them for Lieutenant. Their main function is harassment against one target. Though they are missiles, they are dumb fires unless you sit on a target for more than five seconds, which is longer than the average lock on for any other missile out there. No one sits still long enough for you to lock on them for that amount of time. Everyone is capable of detecting a lock or an attempt at a lock."

Merricks walked over to the terminal and pulled up a file. "Which is why I would install a second set of laser targeting systems on the nose. It would shorten the lock on" he explained.

"Which would also light you up like a Christmas tree and break all stealth configurations. Merricks, did you really think this through? I'm not gonna punish you if you give me an honest answer. Why? What do you want with all this?" she asked and sat down in his desk chair.

"Ma'am? Iâ€| ever since I joined the Air Force, I always had this thought as a kid of flying through a fire fight and unleashing a barrage of missiles on something everyone thought was stronger or invincible. And then the barrage would just tear it to pieces. Then I'd zip away and do it against something else. Remember when you said you took on a Battle cruiser? What would you do if you still had the Mk I and could just punch through its main shield and damage its

reactor?" he asked.

"You can't punch through a CCS battle cruiser's shields with those weapons Lieutenant, it would take multiple hits and you'd be hard pressed to line up enough of them before it turned you into space debris" she advised.

"The normal armament yes, but here. You would have to fire the particle cannons twice to go through that specific point. It scrambles the shield emissions. Fire it once and then fire the grenade launchers with a variable ammunition of aerosol grenades or chaff and you block the shield from re-engaging. Two shots in less than four seconds that drop the shield. Then fire the laser system into it, and you carve into the reactor. Boom."

Elena nodded at what he was thinking. The entire time he wasn't playing with new toys, he was attempting to be a heavy hitter with support weaponry. Fast as a fighter but carrying the damage potential of a heavy gunship. His armor wouldn't be nearly as strong as a gunship or carry as much ammunition, but he had shields and was far more nimble.

"Alright Lieutenant, I see your point. But you should have brought this up to me before you did this. Do you expect me to authorize this?" she asked. He looked confused.

"I'm sorry ma'am, I didn't mean to bypass you. Iâ€¦ don't expect you to do anything, aside from punish me for this" he said submitting.

"I'll have Ezekiel take a look at it and see what he can do for your frame. Don't expect miracles though Lieutenant. The Mk I is an amazing craft, but it can only do so much as you plainly saw out there. Don't expect to go toe to toe with a capital ship and win" she warned.

"I won't ma'am, but in my defense, you did it, and you lived. I obviously won't go toe to toe as you said, but I could potentially do what you did by supplementing your skills with extra firepower for me" he told her.

"Don't sell yourself short Merricks, the whole squadron has more to it than you expect. I'm not exactly holding the whole thing up by myself; you're all still doing a decent job. Jacobs should make a recovery eventually and rejoin, and then we'll have six pilots, maybe even more. Look, I agree with this, however next time bring it up with me ok? You'd be surprised what I'd be willing to agree with. I'm the one who does crazy stunts out there remember? There's nothing too out there for me to consider" she told him.

"Thank you ma'am, I will" he said grinning from ear to ear and saluted her. She saluted back and left.

Her next stop was Roberts. She noticed he was in the entertainment room. She groaned. He was probably annoying some guys in a first person shooter because he wanted to sit down and talk tactics versus actually just playing. She walked to the lift again and went up, then exited on the deck with the entertainment room and walked in.

Roberts was sitting on the couch with multiple other pilots and marines playing some FPS. The others were running and gunning, getting kills against each other as he tried to plan a way of attack. He kept trying to get his team to work with him in a plan of action, but they wanted to have fun.

"Come on man, just shoot. You have like two kills compared to everybody else's ten to twenty. Who cares about tactics, it's a game" Jones said as he ran up a ramp and fired a rocket launcher at someone who bunny hopped and dropped off the side.

"And I have less deaths than everyone else too. I'm trying to keep it that way. I hate losing if I screwed up" he told them as he primed a trip mine near a door to stop others from coming in.

"Man, you are too hard on yourself. Who fucking cares if you win or lose? This is about fun, not winning. You need to talk to Elena on this one. She knows what I'm talking about" Jones said as he was blown up by a tank nearby and his body cartwheeled through the air and slammed into the opposite force, blowing up an explosive barrel and sending two hostile players up into the sky. All three of them laughed at the damage, not even caring if they died.

"I'm right behind you guys, so yeah I should know, I got my ass kicked by a pilot when I was younger" she said over their shoulders. They paused quickly and flipped around to look at her.

"Jesus you are a ghost. Didn't hear the door open. Come to show your leet skillz?" Jones asked grinning.

"You never know. David, why don't you just jump in? Tactics doesn't help if you sit back while everyone else does the damage" she told him.

"Because it can get me killed? It doesn't help for real life, and in the end whoever finishes the other side wins. Winning is fun. Losing isn't fun" he told her. Everyone groaned.

"Hey, you know what? We just died because Jones slammed into us from across the map, and guess what? We loved it. It wasn't real; it was funny and passes the time. To hell with real life, some things you have to suspend in here" one of the marines said.

"This is the first time I've played this, so I'd like to do it right guys" Roberts told them.

"Roberts, hold on" Elena said as she asked for a controller. She entered the game and ran alongside Jones on his team.

"Elena, we should go left, grab the rocket launcher" Roberts commented.

"No, I wanna go check out the tower" she told him and ran up a ramp. A tank fired and blew her away.

"Shit, you're already dead?" he gawked. Jones flipped around and saw where the tank had shot and returned fire. The tank blew up.

"Yes, but Jones got revenge and we took out a vital vehicle. Plus look how far my body flew. I think it's in the clouds" she laughed.

Everyone else realized she got into the spirit of it.

"But you died" he said again.

"In which I had fun doing it. This is the first time I've played this game and to hell with tactics. Oh, and guess what" she said.

"What?" he asked.

"Incoming" she told him as he realized he was in the base just sniping while the rest of the other team came to attack him. Elena came up to the hostile camp and took their flag and ran just as he died and they took their flag.

"Great, no defense" he grumbled.

"Who cares? We have their flag now and they have to return our flag to their base. Guess what? They don't have any vehicles cause I died while Jones sighted and blew them up. Now?" she said as she jumped into a rover and Jones drove her right to their base. She dropped the flag and they scored a point. Jones high fived Elena and they continued playing.

"That was just luck though" Roberts said.

"Sometimes luck is the best strategy. Ever heard the old saying who dares wins? David. Dare" Elena told him. He sighed and respawned, then ran out of the base and towards the enemy team. He was outnumbered but he tried to just shoot at them. They turned around and engaged him as he backed off and nearly died. Luck was on his side, however, as a tank respawned nearby.

"Whaâ€¦ oh yesâ€¦" he whispered and jumped into it and opened fire. Four of the other team was blown away as one fired a rocket. He was killed, but he had four kills versus one kill for them.

"What did I tell you" she bragged. Roberts glanced at her and chuckled. They finished the game with Elena being the MVP as even though she died the most, she made it extremely easy to track the enemy team and return fire. Jones had the most kills on their side.

"Good game guys, good game" one marine said as they all nodded and got up.

"Alright, how does that help in real life?" Roberts asked as the marines and pilots left the room while Elena and he stayed.

"It's simple. You wanna sit back and plan everything? Fine. You're patience got soldiers killed because you didn't act fast enough. You rush in head strong like Jacobs used to, you died with everyone wondering what the hell you were doing. Anything you do can get you shot, including nothing. Murphy's laws of combat. Also, no plan survives contact with the enemy. You can spend the next week devising something to use against those alien fighters out there, and have it blow up in your face in less than two minutes once we are engaged. Work with what you have, and do what you can, or, help others who are already trying something." He listened to what she told him.

"Do you always give such sagely advice?" he asked chuckling.



"When I'm in a good mood, yes. When I'm not, more often than not I'll just tell you to not suck so much. Less suck more pew pew" she grinned.

"Look, you shouldn't even be worrying about the tactics. That's my job. I get to worry about who's out there and what you guys are doing, and if it can cause problems for others. Then I get to instruct you in a different action that involves less dying and more killing. Your job is simply to follow a brief order like "kill that thing, I don't care how," and do whatever you have to do to do that. If someone else is attacking it, follow their lead and help out. If they aren't, ask for help, I highly doubt our squadron is gonna ignore you when you have a chance of knocking something hostile out of the sky. Win-win situation." Roberts nodded.

"I did that in the last fight didn't I?" he asked.

"I don't know, I heard you almost took over and worked with Sarah as a decoy and had Merricks taking their shields down. That was useful. That wasn't a plan though. That was improvising what you had at the time. You adapted. That's what I do every day. Now, enough of me acting like I know it all, I really just came in here to check up on you and the others. I'm done. Take care" she said and left him to think about what she told him as she went back to the bridge to check on mission assignments needed to be done by pilots.

"Did you check on your squadron?" Dare asked.

"Yeah, they're fine" she replied and looked down at the holo map of the space near Deliverance.

(Author's Note: This was just a sort of screw around fluff chapter to add some character evolution from what I can see. I know it has no action in it but I felt the squadron characters were too one dimensional. Maybe have another at a later date, I don't know. Elena tends to act very mature in these fluff chapters. Well, she isn't a teenager anymore, and she did graduate at the top of her class in the academy. Aldric already had some semblance of evolution last chapter so he's safe (He still has something coming I just don't know what it is yet, but I haven't forgotten that giant X he's standing on for a future chapter pal! Yeah I'm talking to you Spartan! Oh shit he's coming this way \*runs\*)

## 19. A New Civilization

\*\*[0900 hours, December 21\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Arriving at Deliverance Colony, edge of Scutum-Centaurus  
Arm]\*\*

Elena and her squadron were already suited up. Each task forces was briefing separately for their assigned missions, as marines were in one area, ODSs another, and Spartans another. Every other pilot was being briefed separately from her squadron.

"Alright, we've done a few changes and made some calibrations to your fighters. Merricks will be fire support for your mission down there, Sarah keep an eye out for him" Elena explained as she pointed to different positions on her holo board. Sarah nodded as Merricks

watched where they were going to be.

"Aldric, Roberts is going to be your dash-two today, keep him updated on what you're doing. Roberts, keep an eye out for easier paths while assisting him. Now, Sarah and Merricks will be on can opener duty and will be designated red feather. Take out all main encampments you find below and assist ground forces while Sarah keeps any air defenses off of him. Aldric and Roberts, you will be dog fighting mostly and will be designated blue feather. Any and all Seraphs or Grendels or even dropships you will take out before it reaches red feather, so get your fangs out. All other UNSC air forces will be handling other locations, so see where you can assist. Try and keep stealth to a maximum, you will be fighting without support but will be providing it to others. We don't need you being knocked out of the sky while others are relying on you, so keep your hands off your loud handles and watch your six" she commanded as they nodded and listened.

They all noticed she told them Grendels would be in the air, as despite Seraphs were standard fighters for the Covenant, the Jiralhanae also had their own fighters, big clunky ugly looking ones that looked more gunship than fighter craft, and believed in armor and weapons compared to speed and agility. Grendels despite their slow movement and similar reaction to a Vulture had multiple cannon turrets equipped and had two pilots and a gunner. They were surprisingly resilient and difficult to knock out of the sky with five engines to hold their bulk above ground.

"Ma'am?" Merricks asked as he raised his hand.

"Yes Lieutenant?" she asked.

"If you don't mind me asking, you won't be joining us?" he asked.

"I have a classified mission assignment here, so no; I won't be going with you. I get the worst of it today" she replied. They looked at each other as they wondered what she would be doing.

"Your pucker factor is 9.7, so keep your eyes peeled for hostile forces and make sure the brutes have a very bad day. Keep your music up and their music down. Come back safe. Dismissed" She told them.

"Ma'am? Umâ€¦ what was modified for our fighters? Beyond Merricks I mean" Sarah asked.

"Gigahertz and nanoseconds" she told them, effectively telling them it was highly technical and complex to explain.

"Understood ma'am" Sarah acknowledged, understanding it was mostly simple upgrades to make their Mk Is running better. Better fuel efficiency, power control, oxygen recycling with filters or more efficient computer systems. Very little change in weaponry or defensive measures.

"Go get your Go Juice and get to your fighters" Elena told them as they walked out. Aldric stayed back for a minute.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"You gonna be ok out there alone?" he asked. She glared and he put his hands up in defense.

"Why would you say that might I ask?" she said slowly and with irritation in her voice.

"I'm just saying, if those things come back, wellâ€¦ I guess I don't quite know how the Mk II responds. You're the only one who has it; I just hope if those fighters come back you can handle it until we come to assist. That's all" he told her. She sighed.

"I'll be fine Commander. Keep your head on the job. Dismissed" she told him. He nodded and saluted her. She saluted back and he left as she sat down for a second.

"You wanted to go with them didn't you?" Dr. Wright said behind her as he entered from a separate room.

"Yeahâ€¦ patrols got old at Shaquille, and now I'm doing what, espionage?" she asked.

"Reconnaissance. Think of it as acquiring valuable safety information for us my dear. We need to gain fleet statistics for any Jiralhanae fleets coming to reinforce the area and how far apart they are spaced. All ONI prowlers are currently occupied elsewhere or assisting in stopping insurrection revolts. With so little stealth operations that has survived the Human-Covenant War, we need your help in this" he told her.

"I know I know, and I know I'm ordered to do this, but still. What if those things attack? Thoseâ€¦ Precursors? I won't be nearby to assist" she whispered, almost expecting the walls to have ears. They did, in a way, as Cherry could hear them, but she was an AI that already knew not to divulge secrets. She was also the AI that Dr. Wright had personally asked to be installed. Why, Elena had no idea.

"Well then, you better get going my dear. Have a safe trip alright? Think of it as a chance to get used to your fighter before being thrust into combat. It will only be for this one battle, and once it's done, you'll come back and continue with the rest of your squadron. Simple" he chuckled. She nodded and breathed deep then let it out in a sigh, then walked out.

Elena headed to her hangar and found a marine waiting there.

"Ma'am, your bag is already packed away for the extended flight. Water, ration bars and recycling provisions" he told her. Recycling provisions meant multiple containers she could use to unzip herself inside her cockpit and relieve her herself in, then zip herself back up and continue her flight. The amount of items was only minor; she would only be gone for a day at most.

"What's this?" she asked as he handed her weaponry.

"Protective measures ma'am. An M7S Caseless SMG and M6C/SOCOM for personal defense." She looked them over and looked up at the marine. She knew how to use them as she normally carried her pistol with her, but this time she was having a sidearm and SMG that ODSs used. She took them and pushed the retractable stock into its compact position,

then checked the sights on each and clips. Both were already cleaned for her. She picked up four spare clips for each, though she doubted she'd need them unless she was shot down or taken captive.

She checked the small emergency bag she also was given for the operation in the event she had any technical difficulties and had to land. Multiple flares, magnesium block and multi-tool with knives, an emergency belt with fishing wire and an advanced medical kit, with a new nanite gel.

"Umâ€¦ I thought this was still in prototype phase..." she whispered to the marine.

"I didn't stock it ma'am, I'm just handing it to you" he responded. "Oh yes, one other thing. I was ordered to give this to you, with this data message" he said and handed her a small case. A note was tacked to it saying "open inside cockpit."

The marine saluted her and walked away as he was done with his assignment and continued out of the hangar. She sighed and packed everything she had into the cockpit behind the seat, and locked the SMG into a small compartment next to her seat. As she closed the cockpit and locked her helmet onto the neck seals, she decided to open the box. Inside, was what looked to be a modified human equivalent of a plasma pistol. A small data pad was inside as well saying "it can be recharged from the ion generator in the fighter. Multiple settings, useful for emergencies or when low on ammo. Doubtful to need." She smirked. Dr. Wright was watching out for her.

She knew the chances of ever needing to use any of it were slim to none, but long distance stealth reconnaissance tended to require expanded resources. She already had the nutrient vitamin cartridge in her helmet and a water nipple as well. She shook her head and got her preflight check done quickly.

"Elena, are you ready?" Ezekiel asked as he gave her a thumbs up outside.

"Kicked the tires and lit the fires" she said as the engines hummed to life quickly.

\_Shall we go?\_

"This is Raven 1-1 ready for burn out, how copy" she said as she checked her load out. All green, twenty P-2 Penetrators, full barrel for the 50s, rail guns had full blocks to chip from. The rail guns were an incredible weapon compared to what she was used to. Instead of firing small pellets at hypersonic speeds, the rail gun would track through the fighter's targeting systems and shear a chunk off of a block and fire it down the rails according to what it detected in range and power. The rails looked similar to two rows of piano keys. This allowed for there to be no warping of the barrels when firing and extended usage considerably as rounds passed down the rows of mobile plates that shifted to protect from damage.

Her EMP cannon was attached just behind her cockpit, with the particle cannons hidden under the armor just under the canted vertical stabilizers. She also made sure she was carrying two Scatter Pack extensions hidden under the switchblade wings, and now were

stealth capable. Her laser she did not want to attempt to use unless she had to, as Dr. Wright had specifically stated "it has the power of a nuke going off if it hits shields if you put it at that setting." She didn't know if that meant at the point of impact or if it was a general explosion to a nuke going off, but she didn't want to test it unless she was far away from a potential detonation.

Overall, if she met the precursor fighters she'd be able to defend herself, and even if she didn't, she could probably turn multiple brute capital ships into swiss cheese just by herself now. She sighed as she knew she couldn't engage. She had to run silent and report back.

"This is a job for the spooks, not a fighter pilot" she whispered.

"You say something Elena?" Ezekiel asked.

"Nothing; just clearing my throat. Raven 1-1 launching" she said as the mag rails fired her out and she disappeared right out of the mouth.

"Shit, she really is a ghost now" Aldric whispered as he barely saw her leave the hangar exit rails and fly away, just as the rest of the squadron headed toward the colony. They still had some distance to travel as they had stayed near the two moons.

"Humans, hold your ground! We are not detecting our fleet which should be hereâ€|" the Sangheili said over the coms as multiple Seraphs joined with the swarm of UNSC fighters towards the planet.

"I'm not detecting any Jiralhanae ships eitherâ€| crap, Roberts! Check for any jamming! Those bastards might already be here!" Aldric ordered and Roberts scanned quickly with Sarah's help.

"Nothing. Maybe they already left?" he asked.

"Those things don't just leaveâ€|" Aldric responded.

They came across an open space over the planet, with no debris anywhere. "Well, no sign of anyone, so maybe those things didn't take out the fleet. Maybe they engaged them elsewhere?" Merricks asked.

"Sangheili would not leave our colonies undefended human. This is most unusual" an Elite said over the coms.

"Well, the pelicans are heading over here now, it looks like we might only have ground forces to fight this time. Raven squadron, head in" Aldric ordered. While Elena was away, he was in charge. They quickly descended through the atmosphere to start the fight.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Elena slipped silently through space after an hour of leaving the \_Conundrum\_ like her nickname entailed; a ghost. There was nothing impeding her as she followed her assigned waypoints quickly and

efficiently, as her fighter shot across the void with little problem.

\_I'm a whole other story than the Mk I.\_

She was in coms range but was told to stay dark in event of the enemy trying to intercept it. Even though they had advanced in communications technology, the enemy could still try and cut off the signal and gain information from it. She couldn't allow that to happen. She dove around the gravity edge of a gas giant similar to Jupiter but blue in color, and then checked her sensors. Nothing. She was going to be doing this for a while now.

She continued to the outer reaches of the solar system, which only had five planets, as Deliverance was the second in the line. She had already passed the gas giant Lighted Way and a rock world similar to an orange moon named Takalm. Elena was coming up to the fifth planet soon.

She dis-engaged her engines and floated towards the right side of the planet, not caring about speed anymore as she reached the area.

\_I'm bored as well.\_

After another hour she reached the last waypoint and sat there with her photo cell panels active. There was no need in using the active camouflage as she was already invisible while stationary. Even if she did move, the new generation of photo cells would be able to keep up with her maneuvers, though there was still a slight outline on the edge of the fighter against bright objects. If she ever needed to fight with utmost stealth, she would use the active camouflage.

She sat there watching her scanners and checking a small pod she was carrying from the back. She had forgotten about the thing until she had launched. It was a stealthed pod carrying two modified ARGUS stealth models with small thrusters installed instead of fans. She could use them to gather more information out in space while she stayed where she was. She also had with them five smaller drones the size of a grenade, each with a much smaller ion thruster. They were unarmed and slower than the stealth ARGUS units, but still could provide a much larger sensor range and more information, and were stealth as well. The side effect was they never could be recovered right the first time.

When the smaller drones would come back they tended to bump into each other, almost like squabbling kids as they tried to reattach to the spindles in the pod. They'd hit each other and bounce off into the void, and a minute later realign and try again. They were slow to reclaim but were still useful.

Elena watched the area with very little care. She had no jamming so no Precursor craft coming, no EM signatures, no IFF pings, and no slip space pings detected. She wondered if her squadron was having a better day, and then pulled out a meal bar and bit a piece off of it. It was a bar made of multiple grinded up berries that were flat pressed into a sort of soft gummy object. The texture was rough but not unappealing, as the flavor was quite decent.

She saw two of the smaller EYE drones bump into each other as they headed in opposite directions and chuckled. The very dumb AIs built

into them didn't recognize each other as a priority when moving, so they took a position near each other by going through each other, or tried to. The speed they could move limited what they could do nearby, and since they were covered in a hardened plastic and rubber protection, they couldn't really do anything to damage one another. They each had an emergency explosive system built in however, which could in some effects be used as a micro missile. She only had five of them, and the damage did not amount to much, but it was still something if she was pushed into a corner. They reminded her of playing pool, with the balls hitting each other and falling into the holes.

She rolled her head as she waited for any sign of anything from the drones, her neck getting stiff. One of the ARGUS units pinged off of something she couldn't quite recognize before the ping disappeared, and she re-commanded the drone to dive back and ping the area again. It complied far better than the EYE drones could, and zipped back softly to send a signal again.

Much further out of the solar system the ping responded back. It was beyond the rim of the solar system but not outside her flight range. Her fighter could effectively go on forever, though her limited supplies inside hindered that. She also now had a slip space drive installed for long distance jumps, and a cryo system installed while she was in transit. It was to be used as a last resort in the event the ship she was being transported on was destroyed.

The ping came back again as the ARGUS drone watched it, and she noticed it was a Sangheili IFF ping. It wasn't directly responding, but it was a part. She recalled all her drones and waited for them to come back, the EYE drones bumping into each other and one time hitting an ARGUS drone, as the larger drone continued forward while the EYE drone flew off into space from the impact.

Mass cubed X velocity = right of way.

She could almost swear the fighter could think on its own, as she seemed to get signals from her neural lace, little hints here and there. She could tell somehow, some way that it was loyal to her, almost a protective. She couldn't put her finger on it, but it almost felt that it either had an AI hidden in it which she still didn't agree with due to the restrictions most AI put on her, or that the fighter itself was semi organic. Due to the way the nano-weave armor worked, that did seem possible.

The drones collected themselves after several minutes and the pod closed back up, and she flew towards the manual waypoint she set up for herself. She flew slowly out into the darkness with only her sensors keeping visual and her eyes swapping through multiple wavelengths to keep track. She could barely see debris in the distance.

Elena flew closer and was suddenly in shock to see a fleet of derelict Sangheili ships as well as Jiralhanae ships, all of them either damaged or completely out of power, simply floating in space with significant damage.

"Shit" they either took each other out or those Precursors came to say hello" she whispered to herself.

\_I agree. Be careful.\_

She slowly moved towards one Sangheili derelict and scanned it. No life signs. The reactors must have burned out or blown without completely destroying the ship. She checked for any jamming of any kind towards her. Nothing. Whoever did the damage, they were either dead or gone.

Elena thought for a moment. She should send an information laser pulse back to the ship to let them know what was going on. She activated the connection and sent the report and checked the surroundings.

"Raven 1-1, this is \_Conundrum\_ CIC. Break communications black out, how copy" she heard.

"Good copy CIC, sitrep is both fleets have been found. Both wiped out. I-" she suddenly had multiple contacts from Grendels and Seraphs coming out of one Jiralhanae ship. They seemed to be escaping in some form, and didn't even know she was there.

"Confirm survivors from the brutes, I have tangos in the void, Grendels and Seraphs as well as Phantom dropships. Please advise" she said.

"Raven 1-1, this is Admiral Hood. They were invading. Destroy the escorts and see if you can't get one of the Phantom dropships locked down. We'll send the \_Absolute Truth\_ to come and pick it up. It's a Sangheili frigate just for your information" he told her.

"Understood Admiral, I'll have it bow tied by the time they get here" she said and cut coms.

\*\*[Music: Spiderbait "Black Betty"]\*\*

She shot forward and armed all weapons. Elena activated her targeting and was immediately surprised she had already ten locks.

\_As I said, I'm a whole new story.\_

She fired four missiles and was already aimed at another Seraph, firing her rail guns and switching to the next. The Seraph's shields resisted the rounds for a split second before yielding and blowing out the other side of the fighter. The four missiles broke into clusters and hit and burrowed into the Grendels they were aimed at, punching into their engines and detonating, the fighters blowing up and a small fireball each.

She was already onto the next Seraph before they even knew what was going on. She was extremely efficient as the targeting reticule already had more locks without even trying to do it. The fighter was doing everything it could to make it easy to keep track of targets, and already brought up a small side view screen in her HUD showing the dropships. She smiled. The fighter knew what she wanted. If it did have an AI, it did whatever it could to allow her to use her skills. She might actually like this one.

Elena flipped upwards, bringing herself in a 240 degree arc as she fired her thrusters to realign, making an obtuse change in direction



from where she was heading, straight towards the Seraph. She opened up with her new Vulcans and saw the shields were flickering, and actually being ignored by the rounds because of the reflection capabilities designed in each. The rounds punched through the fighter and shredded it, allowing the nanites to start chewing into parts and killing the pilot. It sputtered in power and quickly died.

Two more Seraphs and two other Grendels were still nearby the two dropships. She only needed one dropship alive, so she fired her Vulcans into one and pulsed her EMP cannon into the second, and then headed towards the two Grendels as they sprayed their surroundings in hopes of hitting her. She dodged easily and fired her micro missiles into the different turrets, the lock time nonexistent compared to the Mk I.

\_You fly; I'll do the technical stuff.\_

Elena turned right and the particle cannons popped out as well as the laser turned on. She realized she had a firing link suggested to her and was worried the laser would fire on its own from how the fighter acted.

\_Don't worry, new setting.\_

She aimed the laser at the second Seraph as she aimed straight at the first. The particle cannons overcharged from the upgraded generator and reactor, blowing the Seraphs out of the sky as the laser fired. It did not in fact cause a large explosion, but she did notice the beam was focused into a pinpoint reactive response beam, and not the normal beam she expected.

\_It would detonate on the other setting just so you know.\_

The Grendels trailed smoke out of their turrets as they floated, and she fired her EMP cannon twice more to disable them.

The frigate Absolute Truth slip spaced in and found the three ships floating around with more debris nearby. She sat there as they decelerated and she could tell they were astonished.

"Humanâ€¦ did you do all of this?" she heard over the coms.

"Just the fighters, not the fleets. All trussed up for you guys. Have fun" she replied and they suddenly lost signal to her. She then disappeared back into the void and back to the derelict fleet. Her job was done right now, but she wanted to see why they ran from their own ship. The brute fleet was destroyed and captives gained. The enemy didn't even have a chance to truly fire back at her, and never once got a lock due to the stealth systems and the ECM functions the fighter used to protect her. She had noticed the fighter had rotated rapidly through radar frequencies and sensor functions to throw off any lock that even could come to her from the Seraphs. It was in a class of its own.

\_I aim to please.\_

She was gone before they even could send a tug out, trying to gain a bit more information on just why they left so quickly from their cruiser.

**\*\*[Deliverance Colony]\*\***

Aldric watched the surroundings for any fighters of any kind. There wasn't any anti-air to speak of.

"\_Conundrum\_ this is Raven 4-1, we have no contact to speak of, please advise, how copy" he said over the coms as he arced right as Roberts followed.

"Good copy Raven 4-1, we're getting similar reports from the marines on the ground. No life signs to speak of. Make a flyby and scan the cities nearby" CIC ordered.

"Copy that, making flyby" he replied and headed towards the nearest Sangheili city, Sorkune. Renee's squad was down below with the Spartans as they started to drive through the front gates in Wombat APCs and warthogs. They got out and looked around. Not one living soul was seen anywhere.

"This is getting creepy, like some ghost town" Renee mumbled as Milo walked up behind her.

"Sergeant Kilburn, this is Sergeant Taggart, how copy" she heard over the coms

"Good copy Taggart, any sight of the civilians?" she asked.

"Nadda on our side. Place is deserted. We found the city hall they have, or what I think is the city hall, but-" he said but was interrupted by an Elite.

"That is not a city hall human, that is a noble's keep. We should check inside quickly for any survivors" the Elite said as Renee saw in the far distance small movements of marines and some Elites go up the stairs and into the large building.

"We should continue moving" an Elite said next to her, a Zealot named Fin'Tuyokee told her. He had worked with her since Erule Colony, and they seemed to understand each other well enough. He commanded his Elites while she commanded her squad. The Spartans had already started investigating different buildings as she told her squad to spread out. Fin followed her as they walked into what would be the equivalent to a restaurant. The place was sparsely filled with tables and chairs oddly designed for Sangheili legs to perch on, as all chairs were very thin.

They walked a bit more as they noticed there was smoke coming from the kitchen. Renee slowly walked in with her rifle ready as she scanned the area, as Fin dual wielded two plasma rifles and his sword was at his hip, his golden armor shining as he walked around the opposite side as her.

"Anything?" She asked. He shook his head as he noticed some burning sticks of meat over a fire. He picked one up carefully and showed her it. They had no idea how long it had been there despite the meat was now almost completely burned away.

"They left in a hurry, but there's no sign of combat here" she told him.

"It is indeed strange. No Sangheili would abandon their homes, ever. Even our females would fight to the death. Something is at odds here" Fin replied as he looked around more and sniffed the air. Despite the smoke, he still could detect other scents easier than she could.

"There is something in the airâ€¦ something that was usedâ€¦ I cannot quite place itâ€¦" he growled as they moved out of the kitchen and nearly walked into Milo.

"Anything?" she asked.

"Yup. We think we found something. Come take a look" he said and motioned for them to follow. He walked out and down an alleyway and then up a flight of steps. Inside a small alcove was a multi-tiered metal barrel container, with multiple holes running along the outside of it.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Beats the hell out of me, do you know?" he asked Fin.

"That is not something Sangheili would use" he growled and moved slowly near it. He sniffed it and became dizzy. He backed away immediately and covered his nostrils.

"Stay back! That is a nerve gas!" he said as he backed away and immediately pulled something from his belt. He shoved it to his hand and injected something under the armor. He sighed in relief as Renee and Milo backed off with him.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

"I am fine, I used a detox unit we carry for emergencies. This is shameful. The brutes use chemical warfare to fight. They have no honor for the battlefield!" He roared. Renee and Milo backed away a bit until he calmed down.

"Sergeant, we found something" she heard over the coms.

"Is it a Swiss cheesed barrel?" she asked.

"How did you know?" She heard from Taggert.

"Who else has found these? We need a linkup" she said. Multiple other squads found them.

"How the fuck did they get them in here? Hey Fin, you'd expect your people to see something out of the ordinary in your home wouldn't you? Something you'd never make?" Milo asked.

"Indeed. This does not make sense. Unlessâ€¦" he trailed off and ran towards another alley. Renee and Milo were hard pressed to keep up with him as he ran down a flight of steps and to a small door in the ground.

"The underground refuse facilities, what you humans would call sewers. They could have entered from here and planted them" he told the marines.

"Where do they exit out at?" Renee asked.

"Out to sea" he said pointing north towards the ocean nearby.

"What do you say ma'am?" Milo asked Renee.

"I think we need to call the rest of the squad here. I'm not going down there without back up" she told him.

"I agree. If this is where they entered, then there may be an underground encampment we cannot see" Fin told them.

"\_Conundrum\_ this is squad Victor Romeo Two Two Four Bravo, we have chemical hazards here" she said over her coms.

"Copy that, we'll send down a testing crew. Stay away from the zones until they're cleared. Found anything else?" CIC asked.

"Copy, we think we found an entrance to an underground enemy encampment" she reported.

"Probably why we couldn't detect anything above ground" Fred said over his coms as they were in another part of the city.

"Spartans, regroup with squad Victor Romeo Two Two Four Bravo and enter the tunnels. Squad Hotel Sierra Nine Niner Alpha assist them" CIC said. Renee was relieved. That squad was Buck's ODSs.

"Copy that, we'll be there in a minute lil sarge" he said over the coms.

"Great to hear Buck" she said as they waited. The Spartans came up just as Buck's squad walked around the corner. Four other Elites came with Buck's squad, all majors.

"Are we ready? Make sure to strap your masks on" Buck told Renee and the marines complied. They rummaged in their packs and pulled out their gas masks and snapped them into place on their helmets. They turned on their head lamps and opened the door.

As they each descended into the depths of the underground area, Mickey pulled out a small scanner and waved it around.

"What's that?" Renee asked and pointed to it.

"Ah, I got a chemical compound scanner just in case I need to check for explosive ordinance. It works on nerve gases too, plus can help with finding clean water in emergencies. Pretty useful" he told her as he waved it around, checking for different levels of elements in the air and on the ground.

"It looks clear guys, I got nothing. Must have a fast decay rate" he told them as they sighed in relief and walked easier knowing they wouldn't die from exposure to a nerve gas. The Elites had sealed their own masks over their mouths in what looked to be a bulbous pod so their mandibles could move.

Fin motioned for them to move around a corner and they suddenly started to slog through raw sewage.

"God I hope what just floated by was a candy bar" Renee winced even though she couldn't smell anything through her mask.

"It's just biological waste, nothing especially bad" John told her.

"Nothing especially bad? John, look where we are" she told him.

"I don't know, it's not that bad of a smell, I mean, kind of like French toast in a way" a marine said.

"Yeah, French toast dipped in shit" Dutch remarked.

"There are worse things to walk in. Trust me" he told her. She looked up at him as he looked down at her, and she could tell behind the visor he was serious. She trusted he had done it and continued down the tunnel. They walked out to a small entrance that seemed to be severely damaged.

"This must be where they drilled in or broke through the walls" Fin said as his visor turned on his night vision.

"Alright boys and girls, let's head in" Fred said as they walked in single file. The ground suddenly became very rocky and rough, and they had to start climbing over left over pieces of the wall and large rocks to continue on. Renee tripped on one and nearly fell forward but John caught her and righted her up.

"Thanks" she whispered. He made a Spartan smile on his visor and they started to walk down a long slope.

"Guess they didn't check their angle of entry" Buck said out loud as he moved his rifle's flash light around while his helmet's low light system activated.

They finally reached a spot where a tunnel entered from the right.

"This must be the entrance" Dutch remarked as they followed it out, and finally, to an encampment. No brutes were around.

"Wow, they up and left after they got into the city? I don't understand, why is there not a single living being out here?" Kelly asked as she used her flash light on the ceiling, seeing stalactites attached. There didn't seem to be any stalagmites on the ground.

"I'm wondering the same question girl. Honestly, it doesn't make sense" Buck commented as they walked around a metal tent. What they came across was nightmare making. Bodies of brutes lay strewn along the ground, as their organs were falling out of their chests and abdomen. Multiple marines including Renee pulled away and pulled off their masks and retched as the brutes just lay there.

"I wonder" did they accidentally release their own gas on themselves?" Mickey asked.

"At least that saves us time in killing them" Romeo replied.

"But it doesn't explain where the Sangheili citizens went Romeo. They

could have died from the gas releasing and their bodies held for ransom or captive in some form" Buck told him.

"No Sangheili would be allowed to be taken captive. It is a grave dishonor. We would rather die than be held against our will by the enemy" Fin growled at him.

"Hey hey, I'm not saying you wouldn't fight, but I think your people never got the chance you know. If they're dead, hard to fight back catch my drift?" he said. Fin sighed and nodded.

"I see your point." John helped Renee up as she wiped her mouth and some of the other marines did the same. They walked forward some more and found bodies of Sangheili hidden in the tents, piled on top of one another with their own innards falling out. Renee really felt queasy seeing it all.

"Hey, do you need to head back?" John asked softly.

"I think so, but no, we need to keep going forward to find the end of this encampment" she told him as he put his hand on her shoulder to steady her. She thanked him as they continued forward and finally found the end.

"So this is where they were. There's another tunnel that I can see light from to the north. That's how they stayed out of sight and did this. Must have done it to the other cities as well. Might explain why we had no life signs or communications" Fred said as he looked around.

"Hey, everybody hold up" Milo said.

"Something wrong Corporal?" Fred asked.

"Yeah there's something wrong. Anybody see one of those barrels here?" he asked. They looked around and tried to find one.

"You're right. I don't see one of them at all" Renee said as she walked quickly out of a tent that had multiple Sangheili children dead inside. Fin was furious and smashed his hand through a small table, splitting it in two.

"May you continue on the journey to peace my brothers and sisters with the gods at your side" he whispered.

"Alright, so no barrel. Maybe some of them survived and refilled it and moved it, or just moved it in general so it couldn't kill everyone" Mickey commented.

"Hey! Over here!" Milo yelled out and waved to everyone. They ran over and he was standing near a very small tunnel.

"Probably animals" Fred told him. Milo smirked and kicked a side of the tunnel. The thing expanded more as dirt fell away. The inside was completely smooth.

"Animals make rough tunnels, that was drilled" he replied. Fred looked at everyone else as the tunnel looked large enough for everyone to squish through. They each crouched and got into the tunnel and slowly made their way through, until finally they hit a

hump. Milo stopped as he was in front, until Renee bumped him and sent him rolling down the other side.

"Oh crap!" he yelled as he continued to somersault out of control down the next part of the tunnel.

"Shit! Sorry!" Renee squeaked as she crouch walked down the remainder of the steep tunnel, letting her boots purchase some grip on the dirt. Everyone followed her as they reached the bottom as Milo got to his feet.

"Holyâ€¦| Fucking Hellâ€¦|" he mumbled as everyone got out.

"What are you-" Renee suddenly shut up as she gawked at what he was seeing. They were in a massive cave area, hundreds of miles wide, and covered in metal paneling that seemed to be one whole piece. There was no more dirt anywhere, and no dust to be seen at all. Small pieces of metal seemed to be floating in the air at different places.

"Oh fuck, did we find a forerunner installation?" Buck asked.

"This isn't forerunnerâ€¦| look at the colors, the design doesn't quite look the same" John commented. The panels didn't look similar at all. There were no lights on panels to be seen, no symbols of any kind, and the light seemed to emit from certain pieces of metal hovering and yet the metal didn't glow bright.

"This is amazingâ€¦|" Renee suddenly found her voice. Sitting in the middle was what looked like a huge crater with multiple towers surrounding it. There seemed to be a shining metal sphere hovering in the middle with nothing holding it up, and it wasn't moving in anyway.

"What do you suppose that is?" Dutch asked as they walked towards it.

"I haven't the foggiest clue" Buck replied as they got closer. The sphere was easily the size of an assault carrier, and looked to be silver in color but then a slight blue tint at some angles. Everyone seemed to agree it could be the lights playing with the look.

"We gotta report this ASAP" Fred said as he got on his coms. He tried to get a signal but there was only static.

"No response, we're too far underground. I'll head topside and get in contact with the fleet" Fred told them and then went back up the small tunnel.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Dr. Wright had just come down the small tunnel and walked to where a group of ONI operatives were scanning the area. What was at first twenty five people turned into hundreds as they started to explore the cavern.

"This is splendid! Simply splendid!" he marveled as his eyes took in as much as they could from where he was standing.

"Do you know what it is Doctor?" Admiral Hood asked as he stood next

to him.

"I haven't a clue, but I aim to find out. It is a good thing I brought Cortana along for this" he said and opened his data terminal and placed it on a table set up for research. He attached a holo projector to it and inserted a small crystal chip inside. Cortana's hologram appeared immediately.

"Ah my dear, would you per chance be able to figure out what this place does? Was it an abode for living mayhap? Or an armory? Or maybe an observatory?... no no, I doubt thatâ€|" he asked and then thought better of what he was thinking.

"I'll do what I can Doctor. The forerunners believed in a race called the Precursors. They were a significantly advanced race of beings beyond anything the Forerunners had known, and never truly met them. Supposedly they were capable of traveling between galaxies, and controlling time itself temporarily. It was never known whether they were myth or real" she explained as she turned on her holo projector and looked at the large sphere.

"Do you have a guess as to what that is then?" he asked.

"I'll have to do some calculations, and I don't have a real answer, however I might guess that it's some sort of holding container?" she told him.

"Hmmm, I never would have thought about that. Yes, that could work" Dr. Wright mumbled as he rubbed his greying beard. He was already forty eight, and his hair was receding at his forehead and turning grey and white.

"Are there any other caverns connected to this one?" Dr. Wright asked.

"A few smaller ones sir, most look like they have large blocks inside of them, but we can't tell what they are used for" one operative told him.

"Hmmm, could be used as materials maybe, or maybe a power source? No no, maybe a containerâ€| yesâ€| or maybe a piece of circuitryâ€| I need to start on this research immediately" he said to no one.

"How long before you have a general idea of what's going on Doctor?" Admiral Hood asked.

"Hmmm? Well, this isn't truly my area of expertise, it would more than likely be Dr. Halsey providing assistance in forerunner technology, but I believe I can manage it considering this isn't of their make. Perhaps if you could get a hold of her and bring her here we could-" he asked but was interrupted.

"I'm afraid that isn't possible Doctor, as she's currently severely indisposed with other projects. Her plate is full" one operative told him.

"Is she now? Ah, poor Catherine. Ah well, can't be helped" he said and pushed his glasses up his nose with a seemingly knowing smile on his face and a look in his eyes saying "I know you're lying. I know where she is."



"What resources do you need Doctor?" Admiral Hood asked him, trying to change the subject.

"Hmm? Oh yes, resources, yes, I'll need a list of items brought down here, as well as that daft tunnel opened wider; that blasted thing works havoc on an old man's back" he grumbled and rubbed his back through his lab coat. He then handed Hood a list he hastily made on his data pad and walked towards the sphere.

"This cavern smells wrongâ€¦|" Fin whispered as one of his brothers came next to him.

"Indeed brother, but maybe we can learn something from this, from the humans. Who knows? We might find a way to regain what we had lost, knowledge of the gods and how to repair our civilization" the Elite said.

"Yes, that is possible. We simply have to wait and see" he replied and crossed his arms over his chest.

(Author's Note: Oh wow, um, well, the chapter possessed me again, and I have to cut it short right here for a cliff hanger, sorry. Things are about to get very interesting. BY THE WAY, Fin'Tuyokee is in fact Twinkie put through a Sangheili name generator ^\_^ I figured a zealot from a distance has the same color as a Twinkie, as I told a friend of mine. So if anyone actually yelled out his name, they'd be calling him a hostess junk food item? They either want the Elite to notice them or they're hungry. Please review!)

## 20. Precursor Manual Requested Please

Elena slid next to the Jiralhanae ship which looked similar to the standard Covenant battle cruiser, except it had far more turrets on the outside and some patches of expanded armor. Two large cannons were installed in the nose, and of what ammunition fired Elena had no idea.

She kept running dark the entire time, tracking different spots of damage it had taken. The ship didn't look to be fully damaged, and was almost completely intact aside from a few very minor breaches. She couldn't understand why they had left in such a hurry from the thing before.

Her original mission was complete, but she was still curious. Any extra intel could help them in interrogation procedures. She opened her drone pod and let the EYE drones loose, followed by the larger ARGUS drones. She had a drone of similar size to an ARGUS, a crab like drone with a small cutting laser and machine gun, as well as two pincers, but due to the holes already seen in the armor, she believed she didn't need to use it.

The EYE drones flitted about and she decided to split them up, creating a grid of cameras that would send her information inside. They were small and easily capable of moving through different areas and even vents, and if anything was still there that could be harmful, they could zip back. Inside the ship they were surprisingly fast, but outside in the vacuum of space they were just equipped with impulse thrust.

She looked around inside, noticing dead bodies of brutes floating around. The gravity plating was clearly offline, as well as all other power beyond emergency lighting that seemed to even dim from low power in the batteries. The ARGUS drones flew towards the bridge and the armories, checking for data on weapons or their black box. Even if she couldn't find out what happened here, she might be able to bring back some schematic to help the UNSC even further to implement newer technology.

One EYE drone flew softly towards engineering, or what she thought was engineering, but just as it reached the area a door was sealed in front of it, blocking further access.

Elena sighed and checked on ARGUS 1 in the bridge, as it connected to the computers and started downloading. Due to there being no power, it was doubtful any enemy AIs could fight back. Elena even doubted there were any AIs that the brutes could use.

\_There aren't any. I would know.\_

ARGUS 2 had found the hangar bay in which she figured was the exit that the dropships had left from. The force fields were offline and boxes were floating with nothing tethering them down. The whole place was eerie. It was like some horror movie and she had no idea where the monsters were hiding. It wasn't as if she was in the ship herself, the drones were, however if one of them was taken out, it would send out an alert ping that something had happened and the others would investigate. Unless something caused enough force to puncture the armor of the drones, it was highly doubtful, as the only things she could think of that could do that was an explosion that couldn't happen without the power on, or a living hostile force.

ARGUS 1 had found a map that she accessed and started looking through, as well as a blueprint to the ship.

"Jesusâ€¦ these guys are even worse for wear in the tech department than we were before the Covenant Warâ€¦" she whispered as she saw the weapons. Almost all were large cannons, and the brutes believed bigger meant better. There were assortments of missiles or bombs, but very few energy weapons if at all.

The EYE drone in front of engineering found a vent and slipped inside, as it had a small multi tool installed on the front that it could take bolts off of vent coverings. An EYE drone had no manipulation extensions beyond the multi tool, as it was originally designed for simple observation. It zipped into the engineering bay just as her eyes dropped on the log involving the reactor. It had been ripped out of the ship somehow, but the log was damaged. She tried to discern why it was ripped out, as it doesn't explain if it was the brutes doing maintenance or it was damaged. The EYE drone met with another EYE drone flying behind it, and they swept the area carefully. She saw tools floating through the darkness and then one of the drones looked up and saw where the reactorâ€¦ should have been.

There was a gaping hole in the roof, and Elena checked the blueprints to see where the hole led. It punched through the bottom of a Chieftain Hall and through that ceiling, and then went through a

storage room and finally the outer hull. Something had cored through the armor and taken the reactor, as no pieces could be seen of the thing going critical.

She quickly recalled her drones and waited for them to leave the ship, and then just as the last one connected to its holding locks she closed the pod and shot towards a Sangheili cruiser. She again released the drones and had them slip towards the ship, but this time looked for a hole near where she knew the reactor was. They found one in the same position, entering down, and the reactor was gone as well.

"Something is taking the power sources of the shipsâ€¦ I wonder if the previous brute fleet had lost their reactorsâ€¦" she whispered. She recalled the drones and once they were all accounted for, shot back towards the fleet as fast as she could. They needed to know what was going on.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Dr. Wright was sitting cross legged at the edge of the crater, or satellite dish as he started to believe as it was an inverted lens, completely smooth and seemed to be fashioned from one metal piece. He was thinking of just how it worked as he tapped his stylus against his mouth as Cortana sat next to him in hologram form, perched on top of a holo dais.

"Is there any way to make this thing activate in some form? Cortana, are we feeding any power to it?" he asked as he watched the sphere, as it simply hovered, unmoving or spinning, the only thing noticeable being the reflection changing on its perfect surface of the surrounding personnel movement.

"We have four reactors down here Doctor. Just how much more power are you expecting to get before we have to realize it isn't the thing we need?" Cortana asked him as she crossed her arms over her chest and seemed to rest her illusionary weight on one foot.

"I am simply asking a question my dear, no need to think I wasn't listening to the hypothetical power requirements" he snapped at her.

"What? I didn'tâ€¦ fine, sorry. Power isn't the issue it seems, it's more likely to be reactionary" she told him.

"Hmmm, that does seem to be the thing we have not found a connection to. No controls shown, no buttons hidden anywhere, we can't even pull one of those glowing metal pieces out of the sky" he said as he saw a marine hanging from one of them trying to pull it down, ignoring his weight and not budging an inch. There was a ladder with another marine under him pulling at his legs trying to get it to come down. No effect.

He sighed and pulled his glasses off of his nose and rubbed the bridge, then put them back on and looked at the pile of data pads he had stacked. He had observed everything he could from the surroundings, and was given other surveillance data pads from the ONI operatives as well. Apparently they wanted him to crack the secret too.

"Dr. Wright this is \_Conundrum CIC,\_ do you read us?" he heard.

"Yes I hear you well. What is it you need?" he asked as he continued staring at the lens.

"We have captured brutes on board in the brig that we're interrogating, they may have some information for you. Colonel Gripen is also on her way back with more intel" CIC explained.

"Yes yes, I'll head up in a minute" he replied.

"Understood, \_Conundrum\_ CIC out" and the com link stopped.

"Doctor? There's a pelican waiting for you outside. You should take Cortana with you and the data pads. We'll let you know if we find anything else here" one operative told him.

"Yes, I believe I should get something to eat as well. Thank you my boy." Dr. Wright reached down to Cortana's dais and she stopped emitting her hologram, and he then pulled her chip and put her in his pocket. He then ascended the now much wider tunnel up to the brute encampment which was now being cleaned out and used as a marine base due to the defensibility of the area. Renee and her squad were eating at the moment as Buck's squad sat around looking somewhat bored. The Spartans were out on reconnaissance duty throughout the surrounding area.

Dr. Wright walked out of the north tunnel and to a make shift landing area with a pelican waiting for him. Farrah sat there in the cockpit as he walked up and started talking over her coms. He was helped up the RORO and sat down in a seat, as the pelican rose and the RORO closed. He was then flown up out of the atmosphere and to the carrier he had come from and landed.

He hoped the information from either Elena or the brutes could help shed some light on what to do.

\*\*[0500 hours, December 22\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Orbiting Deliverance Colony]\*\*

Elena had been witness to the interrogation procedures on the ship. The brutes were difficult to contain, and all of the guards were given cattle prods. Two HAMMER drones were kept in front of the brig at all times to shred any escape artists if there happened to be one. There were thirteen brutes in total, and one chieftain. They were constantly asked questions throughout the night as they brought them in slowly after tranqing and tasing them all. The Sangheili had sent over two squads of Zealots to also observe and provide some muscle in the event they tried to break out.

She was very tired from her long flight back and being debriefed about what she found out. Admiral Hood commended her on her move to go above and beyond her orders to help with even more intel, and then she simply sat and watched the interrogations with Dr. Wright and Cortana.

They had all but given up after many attempts to gain any other information beyond they were attacked and their reactors were removed by "The Gods."

Elena was literally asleep in her chair as Dr. Wright had his lab coat off and was laying on the small couch in the view room. Both of them had multiple stacks of data pads in front of them, and Admiral Hood was even observing the entire ordeal from another couch.

"This is getting us nowhere" Hood whispered as Elena rolled her neck to work out a stiff muscle.

"How long have we been doing this?" she asked.

Dr. Wright looked at the clock nearby and then thought for a moment. "My dear, I believe we've been doing this for almost ten hours straight. I would have to agree with you Admiral. I believe we've gained all information we can from them."

"Alright, let's put them back in the holding cells" Hood said and got up from the couch, his dress uniform hanging open and his undershirt showing, his cap sitting on the desk and cup of coffee in his hands. He walked over to the control panel in front of Elena and pressed a button and spoke into a mic.

"That's enough. Put them back" he said as they looked through the reinforced one way mirror and saw the brute taken back to its holding cell. It was refusing and standing up holding the chair it was strapped to up, with two guards coming in with cattle prods and being wary of its movements. The brute growled and bared its teeth at them as it tried to break the straps to the reinforced rolling chair. It pulled at the straps hard to try and break free as the guards hit him with the prods and he shook and roared from the strikes. He then struggled even more after they stopped and they hit him again with the electrical current. He stopped struggling after the second hit and they wheeled him out of the room.

"So, from what I can tell, the Precursors are taking power sources from ships. I don't understand. Why wouldn't they simply use their own? Are ours more advanced?" Elena asked.

"Not exactly. I would take a guess as to the requirements for them, but extra power in some form seems to be needed beyond what they have. I believe they are hoarding them in some form to provide a boost somewhere. Maybe they need it to power a ship that is damaged?" Dr. Wright hypothesized.

"Or a base. Maybe the base we found" Hood commented.

"Hmmm, you know, now that I think about it, you might be right my boy! Ah, a Precursor base. I wonder, we have control of it yes? What would stop us from powering it up and using anything it has against the fighters that have been attacking us?" Dr. Wright asked.

"Hell, it would make my life easier" Elena said.

"Whatever we can gather from that technology could help us. I'll talk it over with HIGHCOM and see if they agree. If you'll excuse me" Hood said and Elena saluted him. He saluted back and buttoned up his uniform and grabbed his cap. He then nodded and walked out.

"Is it really ok to just go playing with technology we don't understand? Didn't Dr. Halsey do that with forerunner tech?" Elena asked.

"We are not playing with this technology my dear, we are gleaning from it useful advances that could help us rise as a civilization. Think of it, newer ships, fighters, weapons, new buildings or food containment. Faster travel or building materials. The list goes on. This may only be a ground base, but we could learn so much from it. I only hope HIGHCOM accepts Hood's request" Dr. Wright answered her.

"Hmm, I just want to be careful about this" she warned.

"We will my dear, do not worry. The area is secure, Spartans are on the ground, and the entire fleet will protect the colony from those fighters" he told her and smiled.

"Something just doesn't feel right though. I mean, I don't know what I mean" she said and shook her head.

"You're simply tired my dear. Get some rest. I believe I will do the same" he said and patted her on the shoulder and yawned. She nodded gently and walked out of the room, and then to the lift. She got out and walked to her quarters and entered. Andy was sound asleep in her bed and she smiled. She silently got undressed and slid into bed quietly next to him. He seemed to realize she was nearby and put his arm around her. She finally had a chance to get some sleep and kissed his nose softly, then fell into a deep slumber.

\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\*

John walked through the forest of trees nearby. They were unlike any tree he had seen. They looked like overgrown ferns with small red fruits growing on the trunk at the top, making it look like it had a red tip. There were other assorted plants around him as he moved through the area, and some small animals darting into holes as he came nearby with the sun rising over the edges of the forest.

"John, anything?" Fred asked as he walked much further out at the edge of the forest.

"Nothing. The place seems peaceful" he replied as he saw two odd looking beasts that seemed similar to deer prance off into the forest away from him.

"I'm not detecting anything up here either, and neither is Linda" Kelly said as they were much further above them, observing the surroundings in the mountains nearby.

"Spartan-117 to Raven 4-1, how copy?" John asked.

"Raven 4-1 good copy, what's the word Master Chief?" Aldric responded.

"Nothing down here. Anything noticeable up there?" he asked.

"We haven't had anything unusual. We checked the other cities. No living found inside them. The brutes seemed to do a thorough job. Reports from other marines say no other tunnels leading to underground caverns though. We-" Aldric suddenly shut up.

"What's wrong?" John asked.

"We just got a readingâ€¦ Master Chief, head east two clicks and step on it. We think we found an encampment" he said as he flew just over their heads. John turned and saw Fred charging towards him in the distance to join up. They ran as fast as they could, reaching 55kph and then some, and met up suddenly with Ash driving a warthog. He stopped and had John get into the turret as Fred jumped into the passenger seat as all three of them tore off through the remainder of the forest and towards the waypoint Aldric placed for them.

"What do you see down there?" Aldric asked as Linda and Kelly sighted down at them from the mountains.

"Remains of an encampment, mostly destroyed or dismantled, we can't tell. How far does it stretch?" Fred asked. Aldric slowly flew over the top of the encampment and triangulated the size of it.

"A good two kilometers. No life signs" he replied as he circled over them. John walked forwards as Fred and Ash took different routes, checking along the outside of the base. Most of the tents were either dipping towards the ground in one direction or completely collapsed.

"No bodies, that means no gas" Fred said.

"Or it could mean they were moved after" Ash commented.

"That's true. Keep your eyes peeled" Fred ordered. John went through a small alley between two tents and suddenly came upon a dig site in the middle.

"Hold up, found something" he said as Fred and Ash ran towards him. What they saw was a large crater dug into the ground. As they neared closer the crater turned into a tunnel with a small ramp leading down. They looked at each other and then decided to follow the ramp, walking carefully down due to their weight in MJOLNIR armor.

They reached halfway when Ash noticed a small tunnel leading away at the middle. Fred and John looked at each other and then at Ash.

"Yeah yeah, I'm smaller" he grumbled and jumped for the tunnel. Even with his MJOLNIR armor, the Spartan III was much shorter than the Spartan IIs and could still crawl through the small space. He reached the end and looked around.

"How's the weather down there?" Fred chuckled.

"Drafty Lieutenant, and bite me. I can't see anything. Waitâ€¦ whoaâ€¦" Ash said as he looked like he was reaching for something inside the tunnel.

"Found something?" Fred asked.

"Yeah. Umâ€¦ some sort of pod. Hang on" Ash said and slid out of the tunnel and seemed to disappear. John and Fred waited as he didn't respond, and they didn't know if he fell into another tunnel. His head popped up suddenly on the other side and they realized it was a room.

"Guys, it's some sort of cylinder. Don't know what's in it, but it does sound hollow" he said and wrapped his knuckles against it.

"A time capsule?" Kelly asked from the coms.

"Doubtful. Hey, there seems to be another column running across the room, then disappearing into the ground" Ash told them. Fred and John continued down the dig area and to the bottom, and found another tunnel big enough for them to squeeze through. They crawled into it and found a cross intersection.

"I'll head straight, John take left" he said and John nodded as they continued forward. Dirt fell a bit onto his visor as he scraped his helmet against the top of the tunnel, and he stopped to wipe it off.

"Wish they'd install windshield wipers on the armor" John chuckled. Shields didn't usually protect against dust particles or dirt falling considering it wasn't really harmful.

"You and me both" Fred said as he almost sneezed inside his helmet, the outside filters seeming to clog and clear out.

John crawled a bit more and found where the tube that Ash had told about came out at.

"Found the tube" he warned.

"Really? I found one too" Fred replied. John looked confused under his visor.

"Two exit points? Waitâ€¦ power conduits?" he asked.

"Maybe they're missile silos or cryo pods orâ€¦ hell, how are we supposed to know? We should let the tech heads know about this" Ash said as he crawled out of his tunnel and made his way down to the tunnel the other two were in.

"Ash, can you check the right tunnel before we head back?" Fred said.

"Copy. Entering now. Try not to get your fat armored ass in my way coming back" he chuckled.

"I'll do my best" Fred laughed.

"I didn't know men worried about how big their hips looked" Kelly giggled.

"We watch our weight too you know. Gotta keep up our 400 lbs. of muscle in tip top shape" John replied.

"Tip top shape? You? More like muscled flab. We didn't go civilian John, you did. We stayed in shape while you ate all that junk food and sat like a couch potato" Kelly giggled.

"I am in shape. Round is a shape" he chuckled.

"He isn't that bad Kelly" Linda softly said.



"I know I know, just joking. If he wasn't in shape before he came back, he's in shape now. Heyâ€| " Kelly trailed off suddenly.

"What's wrong Kelly?" Aldric asked.

"We see another encampment, it's well hidden but it's definitely there. Further out, near another mountain range." Linda was sighted on it as she lay prone with her sniper rifle aimed. Kelly watched from a telemetry pod.

"I see it now. There's another dig site in the middle. Tom, Lucy, you're nearby, can you check it out?" Aldric said.

"Copy that. In bound" Lucy said softly. Ever since she had come back from Onyx, she was finally able to speak after her encounter with Dr. Halsey.

"Ok, so, you guys said two tubes?" Ash asked as he moved quicker through the tunnel than his bigger counterparts.

"Yeah, found another one?" John asked.

"You could say that. It branches in my tunnel. Seems they're all connected" Ash said as he tapped the tube.

"We're here. There are tunnels in the dig site" Tom reported as Lucy slid into one of them.

"Great. We have to figure out how many of these there are" Aldric grumbled.

\*\*[Eight hours later]\*\*

"So you're saying there is an entire ring of these surrounding the original cavern?" Dr. Wright asked as the Spartans stood in front of him.

"Yes sir. They seem to be spaced evenly from each other. Thirty five in all" Fred reported.

"Extraordinary. I wonder if the main base itself allowed them to function. Ah, did you by chance bring anything from them? A piece of material, or get any readings?" Dr. Wright asked.

"We weren't able to detect anything Doctor. You might have better luck though. The tunnels are small at each position however. We had to crawl" John told him.

"Hmmm, we'll need to dig again for each. This could take some time. Thank you Spartans, you've done a marvelous job at finding these. You all deserve some rest for your efforts. Did you by chance bring a data pad with you?" Dr. Wright asked. They each handed a data pad to him and he thanked them, as they then walked away and through the rest of the Conundrum to rest from their excursion. Renee and the rest of the marines were swapped with another set to maintain the encampment underground, designated Alpha base.

Elena had woken up with Andy gently running his fingers up and down her arm. She smiled.

"Long day?" he whispered softly as she rolled to look at him. She was groggy but managed to nod.

"I'm going to go eat with the guys, I was wondering if you wanted to come along?" he asked as he still ran his fingers along her arm.

"Yeah, I guess I'm hungryâ€¦| ack, sorry, I can't. I should get in touch with Daveth and brain storm with him. They might send me out again to gather more intel" she told him and wrinkled her nose.

"You can manage a quick bite right?" he asked.

"A quick bite on the go maybe. Rain check?" she asked as he looked at her.

"I hope they aren't going to make you do this on Christmas Eve or Christmas. That would just be mean" he chuckled.

"I hope not either, but I am military, so it is possible. Mmm, are you gonna be alright without me?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm here and I can see you each time you come back, which is better than being back home and you way out here. Just save some time for me on Christmas Eve ok? I have a present for you then and on Christmas Day."

Elena perked up and sat upright. "Really? I'm sorry if I don't have one for youâ€¦| I don't exactly have a chance to buy anything out hereâ€¦|" she said sadly and looked around her quarters.

"I have you, and that's the only present I need" he said and kissed her on the forehead.

"Dido. I really don't need any other presents" she whispered as she leaned against his chest.

"I went out of my way to get them for you. I want you to open them. I have to see your face light up like it always does. It's very special to me" he said softly. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Really? My face lighting up is special to you?" she asked giggling.

"Yeah, right next to seeing you scrunch your face up in confusion. It's really adorable" he chuckled. She furrowed her brow and looked at him.

"Just like that" he laughed and she chuckled and pulled one of the pillows and bopped him on the head. He tickled her a bit as she tried to break away. He leaned in to kiss her and she stopped him.

"I brush first, then kiss" she told him with a finger placed on his lips. She got up and went to brush her teeth as he got up and followed her in. She finished and rinsed her mouth and then turned around. Andy wrapped his arms around her waist and planted his lips on top of hers. She let out a soft moan as he French kissed her.

"Much better" she said as she pulled away.

"I shouldn't keep the guys waiting. You'll let me know if you head out anywhere from the ship right?" He asked.

"I'll let you know if I leave yes, not where I'm going. Remember, classified operations" she told him. He nodded in defeat and smiled.

"I understand. I love you" he said as he looked into her eyes.

"I love you too" she responded back as they touched their noses to each other and she wrinkled her nose in a small smile.

"Alright, I'm heading out" he said and pulled away. She stood there and watched him leave, then turned around and undressed and took a shower. Afterwards she dried her hair and put her clothes on, and checked her terminal for emails and reports about her squadron. Large swaths of information scrolled down as she realized they had made huge discoveries on the surface.

"This isâ€¦ wowâ€¦ umâ€¦ incredibleâ€¦" she whispered as she looked over the large cavern information. She noticed the dig sites the Spartans had found and what her squadron had helped find.

"Please read over this and tell me what you think when you see it. I'd like another person's opinion for it my dear. Let me know if you find anything peculiar. -Daveth"

She read the email and downloaded the information to her data pad, which was extensive, and she waited for it to complete while she put her shoes on and checked the menu for the DFAC.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

"So how many? Thirty five?" Renee asked John.

"Yeah, and we still don't know what they are" he replied as he ate his lunch.

"I wonder if there are others" Buck commented as he drank his coffee. His squad was dropped temporarily near another city on the opposite side of the planet to see if there was another cavern on that side. So far, nothing was found, so they came back.

"I wonder what all of that stuff does. I mean, if it's a container like Dr. Wright said, could there be something inside? Maybe some new weapon orâ€¦ a ship?" Renee asked.

"We won't know until the techs do more research. It could be anything. For all we know, it's a power source that powers those columns we found" Tom commented.

"That's true. Hey, there's Elena" Renee said as she stood up to wave her over. Elena didn't notice as she walked to the line and quickly got a cup of coffee and a brownie, and then left.

"Hmm, she's preoccupied" she said as she sat down.

"Can you blame her? She found the fleet we were supposed to meet up

with" Aldric told her as he picked at his sandwich.

"Really? That's great" she replied excitedly.

"Not great Sergeant. They were dead, and so was the brute fleet. Torn apart from what I hear" he replied as he ate some chips from a bag.

"Was Elena attacked?" Buck asked.

"Nope, well, not exactly. She did the attacking towards some brute fighters. It wasn't even a contest. She wiped them all out and left two Grendels and a Phantom floating for pickup" Fred responded. Buck chuckled.

"Still, odd that two different fleets could be wiped out like that" Aldric said.

"Yikes. I wonder what could have done that?" she asked. Aldric looked at the other Spartans.

"Maybe those fighters" John asked.

"No, I don't think it was those. They're tough but they don't seem to have the real punch to knock out multiple battle cruisers and disable them. I saw them first hand, I would know" he answered.

"Maybe they have a ship they launch from then" Buck commented.

"That seems possible. They portal in and out though, but I could see a base of operations being larger than them" Aldric said and nodded in agreement.

"That's scary. Something bigger and much stronger than those things you and Elena fought. That doesn't sound good at all" Renee said and looked at her food.

"Well, if it's bigger, then wouldn't that mean it's slower? Which would mean the fleet could take it on. We have what, almost 200 ships here including the Sangheili fleet? We could handle it while Elena and her squadron take on the smaller guys" Mickey said and nodded to each person at the table.

"Don't count the thing out yet, remember it's far more advanced than us. For all we know, the thing is the size of a carrier and capable of moving like a frigate. Then we'd really be in trouble. It also already took out a whole two fleets. One more may not make much of a difference" Fred said in a serious tone.

"Don't jinx us Fred, that's just asking for it to happen" Linda said quietly. Kelly watched as Linda finished her tea and looked at her. Kelly got up and put her tray on the trashcan.

"Something wrong Kelly?" John asked.

"I have orders. I'll see you guys later" she said softly and walked out and around the corner, the same direction Elena had gone.

\*\*[One hour later]\*\*

Elena had found Dr. Wright in an R&D project room that was installed into the carrier. All of the new ships now had one for picking up new technology and deciphering something from it before it was sent back to Earth for a complete work up. Sometimes it would never be sent back and continue to stay inside the room until a breakthrough could be made. The Precursor fighter was one such item sitting there.

"There you are Daveth. I looked over the data you sent. Wow. I missed a lot while I was out there didn't I?" Elena asked. Dr. Wright turned around from his desk as he sat in his swivel chair.

"Ah, yes my dear, you did, but don't worry, you made almost as big a discovery as we did. Did you launch the beacons at the right places?" he asked. Elena had a small container on her fighter that was placed between her engines, and detached once she was near the destroyed fleet. It had opened up and fired multiple scanner beacons to detect any operational craft coming nearby, or movement, and then alert the fleet. Considering they didn't have any prowlers with them, it was a decent advanced warning system.

"Yeah, it was no problem. So have you figured out what that cavern does yet?" she asked as she looked over his shoulder. He turned around and typed some things into the terminal and multiple files that were registered classified and his eyes only sprung up. Elena looked away but Dr. Wright grabbed her arm.

"No Elena. I promised I would not keep secrets from you, regardless of if it is research or not. You already know more than most ONI operatives about what I do. I have not hidden anything about my research or what involves you. Please read" he said as she turned back and looked at his terminal.

Information scrolled by as she read power readings, soil samples, metal composition and layout of the area.

"So dead end?" she asked after she finished reading. He sighed and chuckled, then nodded.

"Sadly my dear, yes. Each time I believe there is something I've missed and analyze it, I come up to a dead end. Even Cortana is frustrated with this." Cortana popped up next to them and smiled.

"I did what I could, but I'm no Precursor historian. All of that technology and no manual. Doesn't make any sense to leave it alone" Cortana said as she crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the terminal.

"Have your calculations shown anything at all?" Elena asked.

"Besides their hatred for Forerunners? I checked all my data. Forerunners and Precursors were not on friendly terms from what little I can find out, and Precursors are barely even mentioned beyond a few footnotes. Almost no information on technology in their tier, no ship information, civilization build up, nothing. They're a blank slate. Anything we find out here is like us being archaeologists and piecing together long lost history. Let's just hope we don't find any mummies, or at least ones that were grave robbed" she said smirking.

"I think I might like that idea my dear, even regardless of the grave robbing. We could find out their physiology and determine how they lived in eating habits, strength, or even potentially how they lived. Elena, I apologize but I must asked you to do one more thing" he said and turned to her. Elena stood up from her hunch over his shoulder and looked at him.

"You want me to go out there again don't you" she said stating the obvious.

"Yes, but you won't be going alone this time. Absolute Truth will be accompanying you, and one Spartan. Kelly-087" he told her. Kelly walked in just at that moment and saluted her.

"Ma'am" she said and stood at attention.

"At ease Kelly. So, where are we going?" Elena asked.

"Back to the fleet. I need you to check through the computers of the Sangheili ships for audio logs or other data about their battle. Maybe we can determine what they did before we left, and if they were here before" Dr. Wright told her. Elena looked up at Kelly and she shrugged.

"Um, I'm a one seater Daveth. She rides with the Elites?" Elena smirked.

"Yes. Don't worry, once you've gathered their data logs, you can come back. We don't need all of them, but it will take some time. Kelly my dear, would you make sure you are both packed adequately for this mission? You may not be coming back until tomorrow afternoon at latest" he asked as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Understood sir" Kelly nodded and then nodded to Elena. She nodded back and Kelly left.

"Is there a reason she's going?" Elena asked after the door closed.

"I know there is a bit of tension between you two-" Dr. Wright started to say.

"More like a lot of tension and no trust Daveth. She still hasn't done anything to make up for what she did to Jacobs. She-" Elena was the next to be interrupted.

"She defended Andy when he was being goaded by his fire chief Reilos. He was remarking about you in very vulgar ways and Andy wouldn't take it. He stood up to defend you and that was when Reilos seemed to get hostile. Kelly intervened and restrained Reilos" Dr. Wright told her. Elena looked shocked.

"Whatâ€¦ Andy never told me this! When did this happen?" she asked astonished.

"While you were gone the first time, they were talking in the dining hall. She protected him. I'd say that's one way to try and regain your trust by protecting your fiancÃ© my dear" he said.

"What about Reilos?" she asked.

"He was put in the brig for trying to incite violence on a military ship he was a guest on. He's being reprimanded by his superior when he gets back for needing to have a Spartan stop him for being reckless and very poor in his duties to control his own emotions and reaction to women. Apparently he is sexist" he told her grinning.

"Wow, god has a sense of humor it seems. Andy didn't look like he had any bruises or anything" she said.

"They never reached that point. Kelly got in front of Andy when Reilos was poking hard against his chest from what I saw." Dr. Wright picked up his cup of coffee and drank a long gulp from it.

"Wellâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I guess she did alright thenâ€¦" she said softly and looked at Cortana. She just smiled and nodded.

"She can be crude from what I've seen and quite blunt, but she means well, and she's definitely loyal" Cortana replied.

"Alright. I guess I should go get ready" Elena said and nodded to Dr. Wright.

"You two don't have to leave immediately my dear, you have an hour or two before the Absolute Truth is fully prepared to go. They assisted with dropping off troops to the surface and are now picking them up. Take that time to sort through anything and see your friends" he told her. She nodded and left.

She had a little bit of time to relax, so she went to the DFAC to get a proper meal. She had inhaled the brownie she had and was still hungry after sleeping. Andy was sitting with his fire fighter buddies and he waved to her. She brought her tray over piled with food and their eyes went wide.

"Jesus fucking Christ on a Popsicle stick, she can eat more than Terry!" one of them said.

"Yeah, she's better looking than him too" another said as one with a name tag of Terry stenciled on his coveralls punched them in the shoulders. They both laughed. Elena smiled and started eating her food as Andy sat close to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

"I still don't know where it all goes either. I swear one of her legs must be hollow" Andy chuckled and looked at her.

"That may very well be a possibility, better than my head being that way" she chuckled.

"I'll say, we get a lot of bimbos who try to hang on our arms all the time cause we're "all big strong men that will protect us." They get old fast" one said, his name tag showing Mitchell.

"Bimbos hanging on your arms?" Elena asked and looked at Andy.

"Yeah, they especially tried to keep going for Birken here. I guess that ring you always wear is a beacon or something" Mitchell said chuckling. Andy looked down at the promise ring he always wore since high school. They both wore one, but hers was replaced with her engagement ring.

"Really?" Elena smirked and looked at Andy. He whistled and looked away.

"Uh uh, you tell me all about this" she said and grabbed his head and rotated it.

"Shit, ah honey, it's not what you think" he said as he faced her.

"Do explain" she said with a fire in her eyes.

"I swear nothing happened, I turned all of them down and told them I was getting married" he told her.

"It's true girl, he's stayed faithful, despite us giving him ample chances with lots of girls. Two especially. One was a seriously hot police officer" Terry said chuckling.

"Well good, I'd hope they considered my man hot. I'd hate to be marrying a guy that didn't have some sex appeal" she smiled and winked at Andy. He laughed and hugged her close.

"They don't have what you have, not even that police officer" Andy said as she went back to eating her food.

"No kidding right? I remember that conversation. She asked if your fiancÃ© could hog tie a man with her belt. And you responded-" Mitchell chuckled.

"I responded with "No, she's a Colonel in the UNSC Air Force and can take out an entire squadron of fighters and a Battle cruiser by herself. I think that outguns hog tying some criminal any day of the week" Andy told her smiling the whole time. She glanced up at him and chuckled.

"God what have you been telling them Andy" she coyly asked as she finished her food.

"Just your exploits" he replied as he kissed her forehead.

"What exploits? I don't have any exploits" she told him.

"Well, the battle cruiser, andâ€¦ umâ€¦" he said, trying to remember other things she did.

"That was one time Andy. One. No other times" she smirked.

"Really? What about you piloting that pelican when you were younger huh? Remember that football game?" he asked. She looked up at him and he could see some sadness in her eyes.

"Yeah I remember. I try to forget but I remember all too well" she said trying to smile to cover up the pain that was showing to him. He suddenly realized she still worried about him all the time, even more



now that he was a fire fighter.

"That's pretty impressive girl. I don't think anybody else could have done what you did. Andy still doesn't forget that" Mitchell said.

"I never will. That day proved we were meant to be together always" Andy said and kissed Elena on the lips. She smiled and kissed back, and they broke away.

"I need to get going sadly. I have another mission I have to perform" she whispered to him.

"Damnâ€¦ you'll be coming back tonight right?" he asked. She shook her head sadly.

"No, this one is taking a bit longer, but still, I'll be back tomorrow, maybe the afternoon" she told him.

"Ok. Be careful ok?" he warned.

"I will. Don't get into any trouble while I'm away ok?" she asked.

"What? Me? Trouble?" he said pointing at himself and mocking innocence.

"I heard it from a little birdy that a Spartan had to break up a near brawl" she told him as she got up. He groaned as the others hid their faces.

"Yeah, don't remind meâ€¦ bastardâ€¦" Andy grumbled as he thought of Reilos.

"Damn fine thing that that asshole is probably gonna be fired now. One of us can get the promotion and actually make things work right for once" Mitchell commented.

"No kidding right?" Andy replied.

"No more attempted fist fights on my behalf alright? Promise?" she asked. Andy looked up at her and hesitated.

"You don't have to protect my reputation Andy. I'm a Colonel in the Air Force and I have CQB training, you don't. Most of my friends are marines or Spartans to boot, and they take care of their own as well. I can handle myself. Just take it easy alright?" she told him. He sighed and nodded. She kissed him on the forehead and said her goodbyes and then left.

"Damn man, she's a tough girl. Military ones are always like that. She is impressive I'll say that much. You are really lucky" Terry told Andy.

"Thanks. I know" he replied as he looked at the DFAC door.

\*\*[1600 hours, December 22\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* (Military Calendar)/ Orbiting Deliverance Colony]\*\*

Elena was prepped and ready to launch with her gear loaded behind her seat again. Kelly was on board the Absolute Truth and had spare

equipment and food alongside a pelican. They would be assisted with Elite Rangers moving through the destroyed fleet.

"Alright, Raven 1-1 launching" she said to the CIC. They acknowledged and she fired out and slipped into the darkness, sliding right next to the frigate as they headed back to the battle scene to start their mission.

(Author's Note: So there isn't any action in this one at all, but the story seems to be opening up a lot of questions now. Kelly and Elena are now on decent terms now, and new ideas are being thrown around. Could the destroyed fleet have any unanswered questions? Could the brutes have known about something that happened on the planet? Please review!)

## 21. Flip Switch, No Go

\*\*[0900 hours, December 23\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* (Military Calendar)/ Edge of Deliverance Colony Solar System]\*\*

Elena had slipped into the pelican for a bite to eat. Kelly was sitting opposite of her reading through a data pad and checking on each downloaded data core they retrieved from the ships. Some were irreparably damaged from the battle, but a good portion were still functional. They had a stack sitting next to the pelican as it rested in the hangar of the Absolute Truth.

The young Colonel sighed and looked up at Kelly. She had no idea if they had already gained what they needed, as it could take months for them to sort through it all once they got back. They'd have to turn the data over to Cortana and Cherry to figure out what to make of all of it. Kelly looked up at Elena.

"Tired ma'am?" she asked. Elena nodded and rubbed her forehead. "How many does this make now?" Elena asked.

"I count seventeen. That means thirteen more Sangheili ships and then the brutes." Kelly seemed to waver slightly in her voice as she realized it could take days to get all of the cores back to the frigate they were on.

"You know it's funny. I find it odd that these guys would take reactors out of ships for some random thing out there and not just wipe the fleets out. It doesn't make any sense. If they're tier 0 on this technology tier level system the Forerunners created, then why don't they just make a new reactor?" Elena asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine ma'am. Maybe they needed an extra oomph. What's surprising is we only have confirmation of that cavern and that ring of pods around it. No fighters or signs of any larger capital ship" Kelly replied.

"You'd think they'd try and stop us from controlling that base they have. Maybe they don't expect us to figure out how to work it" Elena commented.

"They obviously don't know us humans very well if that's the case ma'am" Kelly chuckled.

"That's for sureâ€¦" Elena grumbled.

"Hey, look at this. Huhâ€¦ I just glanced over the reports you and the other Spartans brought back of the pods" Elena said as Kelly scooted next to her.

"Yes, thirty five in all" Kelly replied.

"Look at the fleet. Notice anything?" Elena asked.

"Am I supposed to ma'am? They all look severely damaged" she answered. Elena shook her head quickly.

"No, I mean the hole for the reactors. Thirty five ships are missing their reactors from what I could scan, the others were either destroyed or their reactors went critical or beyond use. Thirty five of them" Elena told her and looked right into her eyes.

"And we only just found that out while being here. You couldn't thinkâ€¦ we should send a communique to the fleet" Kelly advised.

"Definitely" Elena agreed as they got up and went into the cockpit of the pelican.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Dr. Wright sat in front of one of the pods sitting north of the caverns. He was sketching the outside look of it into his data pad for future reference and to see if all of them looked the same. He had noticed some of them were slightly larger and some smaller than the others. This could potentially mean anything in how they worked. He wondered just how much power could be delivered to them from the conduits, as each had a conduit tube running to it that looked exactly the same.

"Dr. Wright this is Commander Aldric 4-102" he heard over his small coms system.

"Go ahead my boy, what is it?" he asked.

"Colonel Gripen and Petty Officer Kelly-087 are calling back with news. The pods, they think they don't take power from the cavern. They think they deliver it" Aldric answered.

Dr. Wright sat there for a moment.

"How so? They are all different sizes my boy. Why would they deliver power if they weren't of equal rating potentially?" Dr. Wright asked curiously.

"The reactors removed from the fleet. There are thirty five reactors missing, and the rest are either destroyed or beyond repair." Dr. Wright looked at the pod he was near closely. He remembered reading that each one sounded somewhat hollow and that could simply mean an encasement. It could fit.

"I see. It makes sense now. They produce power to the cavern, not the other way aroundâ€¦ which could dissolve the theory that the cavern was the power sourceâ€¦ a container thenâ€¦ indeedâ€¦ thank you my

boy, I have questions to ask from the Arbiter" he said and Aldric cut coms.

"Uh, corporal, would you mind driving me back to the base? I believe I need to ask some questions from the illustrious Sangheili leader himself" Dr. Wright asked Milo as he sat in the driver's seat of a transport warthog playing a small handheld game.

"Sure Doc, hop in" he replied as Dr. Wright slid into the passenger seat and buckled up as Milo started the engine and pulled back, and then shot off towards Alpha, bouncing along a few times on the hog's large tires.

Once they had gotten to the base, Dr. Wright walked into the caverns and saw Hood talking with the Arbiter.

"Ah, just the two men I would like to talk to" he chuckled as they turned towards him.

"Problems Doctor?" Hood asked.

"Actually, solutions. You see, I have just gained some information from Colonel Gripen involving the pods outside. Arbiter, by chance, would you have the access codes to activate Sangheili reactor systems for your ships?" Dr. Wright asked curiously.

"I have the codes of all of my fleet Doctor. Why?" he asked confused.

"Because, the information I have just gained from the Colonel brings to light there are thirty five reactors missing from the two fleets beyond the solar system's rim and there are thirty five pods buried in a circle around this cavern" Dr. Wright answered grinning. The Arbiter looked at Hood and cocked his head in curiosity.

"Hmmm, why would these beings need to take our reactors? This does not make sense" the Arbiter said.

"Maybe the original reactor isâ€¦ oh myâ€¦" Dr. Wright suddenly stopped.

"What Dr. Wright? What's wrong?" Admiral Hood asked.

"The main reactor may not have sufficient power to bring the base online. And I believe that would explain the dish below the sphere. The reactor is hidden under it. With the other smaller reactors producing more power, it could do what it is supposed to. The dish amplifies the power somehow" he told the two leaders.

"So if I give the access codes to our power systems, we could activate this place?" the Arbiter asked.

"Well, most of them. According to the list, only thirty three of the reactors were taken from Sangheili ships. Colonel Gripen and Spartan-087 would have to gain the access codes from the Jiralhanae ships" Dr. Wright replied.

"Then please have them do so. I shall provide the codes one they have returned" the Arbiter told him.

"I'll let them know immediately" Admiral Hood told him and walked to a communications terminal.

\*\*[1200 hours, December 23\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Edge of Deliverance Colony Solar System]\*\*

Elena received the burst transmission and acknowledged. Kelly put her helmet on as Elena did the same, and Kelly started up the pelican while Elena got into her Black Blade Mk II. Both of them slipped out of the small Sangheili frigate and towards the fleet wreckage as they headed towards the Jiralhanae ships.

"Hmmmâ€¦ that's funnyâ€¦ one of them is missing nowâ€¦ wait there it isâ€¦ it's mobile?" Elena said astonished. One of the brute ships was moving very slowly, crippled and unable to slip space. It had no running lights on and barely seemed to function, but it was definitely moving.

"Didn't you say there were no life signs ma'am?" Kelly asked. Elena acknowledged and checked for life signs again.

"I'm tracking Jackals in there! Damned scavengersâ€¦" Elena growled.

"I'll handle the ship ma'am. Tell the Elites they might want to send rangers to intercept engineering. I'll handle the bridge" Kelly told her.

"Careful Kelly, you don't know how many are inside. We didn't even see them slip in toâ€¦ oh great, I have Jackal ships nearby. I'll head them off at the pass. Guess careful just went out the window. Just get that thing back Spartan. We can't lose it" Elena told her and shot after the ships. Kelly flew the pelican straight towards the cruiser, the weapons not having enough power to even turn on or shields, and she slid it quickly into a hangar and landed fast.

Elena fired multiple rail rounds and particle shots at the Kig-Yar ships as they tried to escape or defend the hulk they were stealing.

"You no take ship!" she could hear over the coms.

\_Greedy little bastards aren't they.\_

"I'm inside Colonel" Kelly reported as she stormed towards the bridge as the Absolute Truth launched Phantoms to help in taking the ship. Elena had already taken out three of their ships as two more were left. They ran as fast as they could and one was able to escape to slip space. The other tried to dodge her locks, which was fruitless, but just before she fired she noticed the Kig-Yar ship wasn't expecting debris to hinder their escape. They slammed into the hulk of a floating brute frigate and their structural integrity collapsed, as the whole ship seemed to pancake backwards.

"That thing is made of chewing gum and tin foil! They actually fly those things?" Elena gasped in amusement.

Kelly shot towards the bridge quickly, firing her shotgun at two Jackals trying to hide behind their shields. Her rounds punched

through the small openings they tried to push their weapons out of and disoriented them, giving Kelly enough time to run at them and snap one of the jackal's necks and then kicked the other into the wall. The Jackal slammed into the bulkhead and made a large dent, breaking its back. The Jackal fell to the floor as Kelly dropped the first one, and continued onwards.

Elites landed in the hangar next to the pelican and went the opposite direction as two Special Operations Sangheili charged after Kelly.

"Kelly you have two Spec Ops coming to back you up" Elena reported as she checked for any mines they might have placed outside. If they didn't get the ship, the Kig-Yar could just destroy it, and they'd lose any access codes needed.

"Understood ma'am. I'm at the bridge entrance" Kelly said as she crouched to the right side of the door. Both Spec Ops closed in on her and braced against the left side. They looked at her and nodded. She made some tactical motions with her hands towards the bridge, telling them to flank left as she went right and be careful with shooting, worried any of them could hit the computers. They nodded and turned on their active camouflage, and she did the same.

They slipped in to find twenty Kig-Yar checking diagnostics on the computers and screeching to each other. One was standing at the top of the bridge, a female from the look of the armored plating on the neck and arms. The Spec Ops were silent as they moved to the left and checked to see if she was in position. She sent them a code message in her helmet.

"Don't use grenades. Kill them in any way that doesn't damage the systems" Kelly told them.

"We will kill them quickly without explosives. We shall handle the front, take care of the rear Demon" one of the Spec Ops said. Kelly winked a green light in response and backed off as they Elites got ready. 3. 2. 1.

The Elites shot forward with their plasma rifles firing accurately and efficiently as two Jackals went down and a skirmisher turned around. One of the Elites skewered him with a small energy blade in his armor and the second sliced two others with an energy sword. Kelly shot forwards and pressed her Shotgun to the female's face, blowing the head off and grabbing the next Jackal trying to turn around, before throwing him over a control panel and into the wall. Seven down so far.

Two Skirmishers had started to open fire on the Elites as they dodged and rolled towards them, kicking hard and sending one of them into the other, and before they could get back up the Spec Ops with the energy sword impaled them into the ground. Nine. One Jackal threw a fragmentation grenade, a stolen HE-90 UNSC issue, and as it sailed through the air, the second Elite grabbed it and threw it out of the bridge door, the explosion doing nothing to the controls.

Kelly leapt over a panel and literally sat on top of another Jackal as she rifle butted the one that threw the grenade. She heard its neck snap and it collapsed, as the one under her fought for air as she stepped on its head, crushing its skull. Eleven.

The Elites slipped towards the remaining nine Jackals as two ran to escape, and just as they reached the door one of the Elites threw a grenade. Kelly was about to yell at them for using an explosive after she told them not to, but the Jackal continued running down the hallway and blew the other one up. Two skirmishers fired needle rifles at one of the Elites as he came at them and punched one and pulled it in front of him, using it as a shield and bringing his plasma rifle to bear, firing a quick burst into the second skirmisher as the first went limp in his grip from the needles piercing him. Fifteen.

Kelly fired two more rounds at the remainder as they opened up on her with their plasma pistols, as one overcharged shot struck her shields and drained them. She rolled and tackled one of the Jackals as an energy sword came sweeping towards another, impaling him into the wall as the last three fired at the Elite. Kelly punched the Jackal twice and stunned him while breaking his teeth and almost popping one of his eyes. The Jackal was knocked unconscious as the second Elite roundhouse kicked one Jackal into another, sending them flying over a rail. The last one had its head severed by an energy sword.

All three of them ran around the rail and aimed at the two Kig-Yar that had fallen over the rail. One crawled along the ground while another tried to pull its needler. Kelly fired one round into its chest as the last one continued to crawl away. As they reached the final one, he turned around and primed a grenade.

"Stop him!" one of the Elites yelled as Kelly had two seconds to quickly act. She ran up to him and with all of her strength kicked him straight up as high as she could. The ceiling of the bridge was as large as most Covenant ship bridges, and reached upwards of twenty feet. The Jackal sailed through the air and blew up in an interesting fireworks display, other grenades on his belt igniting and continuing to blow. The body, or what was left of it, showered the ground.

"Bridge secured" Kelly commed Elena just as she gained similar acknowledgement from The Sangheili in engineering.

"We have control of engineering humans. They had set up small generators to provide power to this wreckage" they said.

"Understood. Keep them running, they might allow us to get the access codes quicker" Elena told them and they acknowledged. The two Spec Ops Elites nodded to Kelly as the mission was complete.

"I've yearned for a while to kill those verminâ€¦ by the gods it felt good to gain a chance to fightâ€¦" one of them growled in contentment.

Kelly walked back to the pelican and pulled out an empty data core and went back to the bridge. Elena saw more Phantoms fly over to the second brute ship that had its reactor pulled out and dropped inside more troops to head in and gain the access codes inside of it.

"Mission will be completed in one hour. Good work everyone" Elena said. Multiple green lights winked from the Elites and Kelly. They've

gotten used to working with each other.

**\*\*[Three hours later]\*\***

The Absolute Truth sped back to the fleet and dropped the two women off at their ship, as Dr. Wright had left the surface and headed to the Conundrum alongside the Spartans. Both of the women had entered the changing room and got out of their suits, and then picked up the data cores. Elena walked with Kelly as the Spartan carried both data cores on her shoulders as Elena opened doors and had her put the cores inside the R&D room.

"Splendid, simply splendid! Cortana, would you be so kind to translate the information and provide us with the access codes?" Dr. Wright asked.

"Of course. Give me a moment to access" Cortana said as she read through the files. She sat there for what seemed a few minutes as data slid across her body.

"The brutes don't seem to get the idea of indexing it seems. And you'll never believe this. I can't find a single access code" she told them. Dr. Wright looked confused.

"Could the files be corrupted?" Elena asked.

"Doubtful. I can repair those Colonel, but thisâ€¦ it's like they just aren't there" Cortana replied. Everyone seemed annoyed with the news.

"So we have thirty three access codes and two restrictedâ€¦ couldn't we just put two of ours in there and override the conduits?" Elena asked.

"We would have done so if we could get the pods to open my dear. Sadly, we don't know how the reactors were put in there in the first place, or if the brutes were the ones to dig. For all we know, the Precursors killed all the brutes and placed the reactors there. Which could meanâ€¦ the nerve gasâ€¦ it wasn't of Jiralhanae makeâ€¦" Dr. Wright said as he came to a conclusion.

"So the Precursors took the reactors, killed all life on the planet aside from animals, dug the holesâ€¦ and left? Maybe they ran into the same problem we did and couldn't get the codes" Kelly hypothesized.

"That's doubtful for their kind, they would most likely have AIs that could crack the systems and activate them. More than likely we got there before they could finish activating the base. Oh, Elena, I have something to tell you. The fighter we brought in? It isn't alive" Dr. Wright told her. Elena stood there thinking.

"You mean no pilot?" she asked. Dr. Wright nodded.

"It's a sophisticated adaptive AI program. It isn't truly sentient, but it is still very dangerous. It considers us hostile and attacks according to threat levels it seems. During the last fight, there were enough squadrons attacking the second one to be considered a higher priority. The first one considered you a priority alone. When the third entered the battle, they must have sent an emergency



response that you had reached a much higher threat level than all the others combined" he told her.

"Wow, soâ€¦ sheesh, I feel honored, I think. They hated me that much to send two of them after me. Guess they don't like fighting fairly huh?" Elena said sarcastically.

"They don't fight fairly because they fight logically. You had a much higher flight skill than the others, and therefore they believed if they took you out first, the chances of winning would significantly improve. With the Ride The Light entering the battlefield and using itself as a shield, they must have believed it was a defense for you, and did everything they could to finish all of the escape pods before continuing to attack. I don't believe they were being vicious Elena, they were following a threat scale" Dr. Wright explained.

"Could have fooled me, and it doesn't make me any less angry at them either" she growled.

"Regardless, we can now activate the reactors, except the last two" He told them. Elena and Kelly sat there thinking.

"What if the reactors don't have access codes?" Elena suddenly asked. Dr. Wright looked confused.

"Think about it. They're brutes. We already think they're dumb, and maybe their hierarchal society forbids trying to stop systems from functioning. We could try it out" she told him. Dr. Wright looked at Cortana and she went through simulations quickly.

"It could work. If there aren't any codes, then they'd just activate. Thinking outside the box are we?" Cortana smirked at Elena.

"I do it for a living it seems" she chuckled in response.

"We should get something to eat quickly before we head down for this momentous occasion" Dr. Wright grinned and patted her on the shoulder, as they both nodded and walked out. Kelly went immediately to the DFAC as Elena went up a lift and to her quarters. Andy was there reading a book as she walked in.

"Hey there, how was the trip?" he asked.

"Fine, we think we made a discovery now. We're actually going to get this show on the road finally" she told him as she pulled out another uniform and underwear and started to get undressed. He sat there with an eyebrow cocked as she unzipped.

"What?" she asked confused as she stripped. He gave her a small smile and pointed at what she was doing.

"Oh come on, we're going to be married. You'll see me unclothed many more times than this" she grumbled as she took her uniform off and took her bra off.

"Yeah, I know, still, it's always a great view when you do it" he chuckled. She rolled her eyes as she stepped into the shower.

"Need me to wash your back?" he yelled. He saw a hand shoot out of the shower and flip him off.

"I thought we were waiting til we were married for that?" he laughed out loud. She poked her head out of the shower and glared at him with a smile on her face.

As she finished her shower and dried her hair, she turned around to see Andy come up behind her and hug her.

"Hey, I haven't put my panties on, hold up for a moment" she told him as he wouldn't let go.

"I'm just giving you a hug hon, not like I'm bending you over the sink for a quickie or anything" he chuckled as she looked up at him with a cocked eyebrow and a smirk.

"With the way your mind works sometimes, I wouldn't know" she scoffed and grabbed her panties and bra from a small chair.

"You're the one who drives me to those thoughts last time I checked" he growled lustfully as he leaned in to kiss her neck.

"Hey, I'm not the one who has two brains and loses blood flow when one of them turns on bucko. I am the smarter of the two sexes thank you" she goaded him.

"Oh really? Say something smart then" he said as he continued to kiss her neck.

"Stop! not there Andy! smart? Fine, you should be hanging with your fire fighter buddies instead of sitting here reading. Unless they aren't as interesting as the book, in which case I feel sorry for you" she said as he kissed some sensitive spots on her neck and shoulders.

"Oh really? Maybe they are just taking naps and I didn't have anything else to do while waiting for you to come back hmm?" he commented. She giggled as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Stop, seriously, I have to go get ready for something very important." She pushed him softly away as he looked down at her.

"What's so important that you can't spend some time with me?" he asked mocking hurt.

"Something I can't tell you about. Once everything is done, it will make our lives a lot easier. I'll spend time with you, just I need to get ready" She told him and gave him a peck on the lips. He leaned his forehead against hers and smiled.

"Promise?" he asked.

"Pinkie swear" she told him and brought her pinkie finger up for him to wrap his own around. He held it gently and wrapped his own around it, and then brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. Elena giggled and kissed him again, then pulled away and got her uniform on. She put her shoes on her feet and walked to the door.

"Hey, I just thought of something. Have you seen the marines on

board? Renee and the ODS'Ts I hang out with?" Elena asked and looked at him.

"Yeah, they just came up. Why?" he asked.

"Come on, I wanna do something before this whole thing starts" she told him and reached for his hand. He stopped her and put his shoes on, then grabbed her hand as she led him out of her quarters and into the lift. She pulled up her data pad and sent emails to her friends telling them to meet her in the hangar. Just as they left the lift, she almost walked right into her father.

"What? Dad? What are you doing up out of the medical bay?" she asked astonished by him moving around.

"I'm doing much better now, and the rehab started this morning. Apparently I'm a fast healer sweetheart. I just decided to come down here to see Zeks, with escort of course" he said as he motioned to the nurse who was helping him walk. He was hunched over a tiny bit, but he wasn't wheezing for air or looking tired yet.

"Alright, just don't push yourself ok? I don't want you collapsing or anything you hear me?" She asked as she hugged him.

"I promise honey, I wouldn't want you to worry about me. Hey, Zeks said you just sent him an email to be in the hangar? A photo he said?" Jack asked.

"Yup. Remember when I was younger? Well, there's going to be something that happens soon that could change our lives, and, well, I wanted to do one more" she told him.

"And you didn't send me an email?" he chuckled.

"Well I thought you were still in the medical bay! I didn't know you were even up and about! I'm sorry, I-" he put his hands up to calm her down.

"It's ok, I don't have a data pad right now anyways. Let's go do this" he said and put his arm around her shoulders. They walked into the hangar and waited for the others come in. Buck, Mickey, Dutch, Veronica, Renee, John, Ezekiel, her father, Andy, Kelly was allowed to join, Linda, Ash, Tom and Lucy, Fred, Aldric, Dr. Wright, Sarah, Merricks, Roberts and herself were all sitting in front of her fighter. Jones was sitting behind Elena as he was finally able to get another group photo. Admiral Hood walked in with the Arbiter at that moment.

"Uh oh! officer on deck!" Elena yelled as everyone who was military shot up and saluted. Admiral Hood saluted back and let them stand at ease.

"I was told by Captain Dare that you were all down here for a photo for this momentous occasion. I told the Arbiter about how it is done. He seemed intrigued, so I decided to show him. Carry on" he explained as they got back into position and Ezekiel got his camera ready.

"Alright, timer is on! Get ready! Say bollocks everyone!" Ezekiel said and ran to his position as Jack and Andy hugged Elena. They all

smiled as Renee was being held in John's arms, and the Spartans did their best to crack their masks of stone. They got up as Ezekiel ran to a small printer and printed a copy for each person.

"God I look like I got kicked by a bloody horse in thatâ€¦" Ezekiel scoffed as everyone laughed.

"Can't be worse than what you normally look like when your drunk" Elena goaded as everyone oohed at the response. Ezekiel smirked and shook his head.

"To tell you the truth, I think this one is much better than the one we did all those years ago" Jones said as he looked at his picture. "Wait wait wait, nevermind, Ezekiel you look like you just got snipped in this one compared to the last one" he laughed. Ezekiel threw a small bag of screws at him and he dodged laughing even more.

"Let's see how well you look when I kick you in the arse you daft git!" he said smirking as he charged after Jones playfully fighting him. Elena looked at her picture and handed one to Andy.

"Wow, I think you look even better in this one than in the old one" Jack said smiling.

"I'm older now. Things have changed a bit, but they're still the same for some things" she remarked. Andy hugged her close as he looked at it.

"Well obviously things have changed. You're far more beautiful now than before" he whispered and she blushed.

"Alright! I say we get some grub and then get ready for the big start up!" Buck yelled out to everyone and they agreed. They all piled out of the hangar as Elena helped the nurse get her father into the lift and up to the DFAC.

For the next two hours they sat around talking about different things at two tables as they ate. Dr. Wright whispered something into Elena's ear and she nodded.

"Attention everyone! I hate to break the news, but we should probably go get ready for the activation. Fun is over, duty calls" she said. Everyone groaned and nodded as Andy got up and looked her in the eyes.

"What's being activated?" he asked.

"I can't tell you. Classified. I just know that it will change our lives somehow" she told him. He nodded somehow understanding as they put their trays away and walked out of the DFAC. Andy stopped Elena outside the door as the others filed by.

"Hey, be careful alright?" he told her in a worried tone. She looked up into his eyes and saw concern filling them.

"Andy, this is part of my job. Nothing is going to happen I don't think. Look-" she tried to say.

"Be careful doing whatever it is you're doing. If anything happens to

youâ€¦ I don't know" he said softly. They were silent for a moment as the only sound was of the ship's power coursing through it.

"Andyâ€¦ I need to ask you something. I need you to do me a favor alright?" she asked.

"Alright" he answered immediately.

"And I need you to promise me, pinkie swear you will do this no matter what ok? Because if it ever happens, I need to know you'll keep the promise" she told him.

"What are you asking me to do?" he said curious.

"I need you to pinkie swear first before I tell you it" she told him. He looked down at her finger as she raised it and thought for a moment. He finally did the pinkie swear and asked her what she wanted.

"I want you to move on if anything ever happens to me, no matter what. I want you to continue with your life however possible. My job is very risky. I don't think this will happen soon, but if it does, please, make sure you continue forward." He looked shocked, almost angry.

"What? Not a chance! I won't give up on-" he stopped as she put her finger to his lips.

"If it happens, I will most likely be dead. You understood this when I joined the UNSC remember? You already promised. Keep it please" she told him. He breathed deep and seemed to be ready to explode at her.

"Then you also promised as well for the same thing. That pinkie swear goes both ways. If anything happens to me on Sangheilios or back home or anything, you do the same got it? Otherwise this thing crashes right here and now" he told her. She looked at him oddly with wide eyes.

"What? Iâ€¦ alright, fine, but nothing is going to happen to you. We obviously each do our best to make sure it doesn't happen right?" she asked him. He nodded and immediately hugged her, feeling very protective of her going.

"Hey, I'm not gonna just drop dead right here and now hon, easy" she muffled into his chest as he hugged her closely, not wanting to let go. He finally pulled away and looked at her.

"Remember, it's just in case ok?" she asked. He nodded again and gently caressed her face. She put her hands on his as he did so and pulled them gently down, and said goodbye to him.

"How long is this going to be?" He suddenly asked.

"I don't know, an hour? Two? Shouldn't be too long. I'll be sleeping with you tonight no doubt" she told him smiling.

"Ok, just checking" he said hesitantly.

"Go hang out with your buddies Andy! I'll be fine! You worry too

much" she giggled and walked off.

He sighed and thought about what she said. If anything did happen to her, he didn't think he'd have the strength to go on. She was his world.

\*\*[1900 hours, December 23\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Deliverance Colony]\*\*

Elena sat down on a chair as the Arbiter gave his access codes to each Sangheili reactor. They turned on easily, as they finally had gained control of the Jiralhanae reactors as well. No code was needed for them.

"Alright, transferring the power" Cortana said as she read through the controls and checked the conduits were sending power to the cavern.

"They're at maximum, the main reactor is onâ€¦ here we goâ€¦" she said as they all watched. Power churned through small glowing patches under the ground and towards the large lens crater. The pylon towers glowed bright. Nothing else happened.

"I don't understand, there aren't any switches it seems, nothing is activating, no feedback from cycling up, it's as if it's reading the power but doesn't know what to do with it" Cortana said as she stood there confused on her holo dais.

"Well this was a bust" Buck grumbled under his breath. He walked over and kicked one of the pylon towers in hopes it would wake it up. Veronica cleared her throat and Buck turned around. Fred shook his head towards him and he walked back sheepishly as Veronica glared at him.

"What? The old boot sometimes fixes some things back home" he told them.

"Maybe they need to be slowly powered up or it trips a circuit breaker?" an ONI operative asked. Cortana nodded and dialed down the reactors, and then turned them back on slowly, one after another until all were on. Again, nothing happened.

"This doesn't make any sense! We have the power, it's receiving and acknowledging it, Cortana stated that, but it doesn't do anything? Maybe that's why they don't come here right now? The place is broke?" Elena commented. Everyone started talking amongst themselves as Dr. Wright walked towards the lens. He sat down slowly and looked at the towers around the edge. They seemed to light up with the power being given, but nothing was being done to transfer it to the sphere in any way.

"It looks like we'll have more research to pile through before this place is usefulâ€¦" one operative said as the Arbiter stood there crossing his arms over his chest.

"Well, at least we know it can receive the power, and we know the reactors work and haven't blown. We just need to get the on button to activate" Aldric said as they watched from the edge of the cavern. The marines and Spartans were escort just in case the techs were under attack from anything inside the cavern that turned on and

hostile.

Elena sat back in her chair flipping a stylus for a data pad around her fingers, quite bored.

"All that work we did and the thing gives us a fuck youâ€¦ wonderfulâ€¦" she grumbled as Cortana turned around.

"It's not broken Colonel. We just don't know enough about the controls to get it to work yet. There isn't any writing anywhere, maybe there is a set of switches inside the pylon towers to control it. I just have to find a way to open the doors to allow access" she said as she looked like she was suddenly in concentration.

Elena sat up and looked at the top of the cavern. She looked around the edge of the lens and then up.

"Heyâ€¦ HEY!" she suddenly yelled as everyone looked at her.

"There's a lens on the ground right? What if the roof needs to be scraped clean or removed altogether?" she asked. Everyone looked at each other.

"That's an idea. It could work. It's just rock and dirt above it. The whole cavern must have been buried under it and may require a connection to something outside to function" Dr. Wright suddenly said as he got up and looked at her.

"Can we get some digging done above?" Elena asked.

"And risk having them fall into this place? It'd have to be done carefully Colonel" Admiral Hood said. Elena apologized and looked at everyone else.

"We can provide for that. Our Scarabs can be brought down to allow only a small incision to be done over this place. Then we would use our gravity lifts to take the remainder away with our dropships" the Arbiter explained.

"I didn't think about that. That would significantly speed things up" Hood replied.

"I will send the order immediately" the Arbiter said as he opened his coms and spoke in Sangheili. He heard an acknowledgement.

"This will be done throughout the night. We should get some rest while we can. It will be finished by tomorrow" the Arbiter let everyone know.

"Sheesh, talk about pushing the envelopeâ€¦ they don't fuck around do they?" Renee whispered to Buck.

"No kiddingâ€¦ must be sending a graveyard crew down with the Scarabs. Still, better than our digging equipment. It'd take us a week to finish it" he whispered back.

"Alright. We'll all reconvene back here tomorrow in hopes this will fix the problem" Admiral Hood told them and they all acknowledged and walked back up the small tunnel and to waiting Pelicans and

Phantoms.

\*\*[0000 hours, December 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Deliverance Colony Orbit]]\*\*

Elena slipped into her quarters dragging her feet. She felt depressed and frustrated that all of the work that she and her squadron and the Spartans had done to figure this out wasn't amounting to much. The ONI operatives on the ground and Dr. Wright were almost screaming at the cavern to wake up and do what they thought it would, to defend the area or open a container to provide some advanced technology they could research.

She kicked off her shoes and unzipped the top of her uniform, and then flopped onto the bed backwards. She was exhausted and pissed at the little joke played on them. She noticed Andy wasn't in bed. She guessed that he might be with his buddies playing a game or watching a movie.

"Fuckers have a sense of humorâ€¦ might not even be like forerunner techâ€¦ humans might not even be able to activate itâ€¦" she whispered to herself. She heard the door open and Andy walked in. He smiled. She must have guessed wrong.

"I guess I missed you at the door to the hangar lift. I thought of something after you left. About what we promised" he said.

"Hey, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to spring that on youâ€¦" she tried to say as he brought his finger up to her mouth to stop her.

"It's alright, and I understand, which makes me realize we really need to cherish all the time we have together. So, remember those two Christmas presents I brought? I don't want you to wait until tomorrow morning for the first one. I want you to open it. Please, for me? I have to see your face glow while I can. It's technically Christmas Eve right now" he said softly. She gave him a soft smile and kissed him.

"I'm not disappearing tomorrow Andy. I came back tonight didn't I? You don't have to give me the present honey. I'm fine with waiting. Remember when I was sixteen and waited for your present? I still have that jacket you know" she giggled.

"Really? Where is it?" he asked.

"It's inside the Esprit back home. Thank god the brutes didn't damage it; I would have really been pissed if that happened." He pulled out a small long present box.

"Oh Andy, you don't have to, I'm fine with-" he put his finger to her lips.

"Stop. I need to do this. You're special, and this is only one way to prove how special you are to me. Go on, open it" he told her softly and she sighed and ripped open the wrapping. It looked like a small jewelry box, painted in old Japanese. The edges were gold laced with small golden roses popping out at different areas, the lace looking like vines.

"Wowâ€¦ this is beautifulâ€¦ I love itâ€¦" she smiled and kissed



him.

"There's more. Open that now" he said. She looked at him confused, and looked at the bottom drawer. She opened it slowly. Inside was a necklace, and when she pulled it out, it looked to be a golden vine chain similar in look to the box's lace, with a center piece that looked like two pairs of hands. One pair of hands that looked masculine was holding the other pair which looked feminine, and the fingernails were diamonds. The feminine hands seemed to shimmer as if coated in a diamond dust. Cupped inside both hands in the middle was a half ruby and half sapphire heart. She gasped and looked up at him.

"One heart shared between both. I hope you like it" he whispered as he hugged her close while she looked at it.

"Andy, you didn'tâ€¦ I meanâ€¦ oh my godâ€¦ how?" she asked almost breathless.

"Remember how my family thinks of you? They helped me find it. I had some help buying it though. I couldn't resist. I had to get it for you. The hands, well one pair, looked ghostly. I just knew, this was for you, no matter what. Merry Christmas Elena Gripen" he almost whispered as she hugged him closely.

"Merry Christmas Andy Birken" she whispered in his ear as they just held each other for a few minutes. They pulled apart as he turned the necklace around and showed her the clasp.

"For the love of my life, and always will be. Forever" was etched into it. It brought tears to her eyes reading it.

He softly grabbed the necklace and offered to put it on her. She pulled her hair forward over her shoulder as he draped it in front of her and pulled up, and then clasped it together. She turned around and fingered it a tiny bit before looking up at him.

"Wow, it definitely accentuates your beauty" he said and she giggled and kissed him.

"Well obviously it tells of just what a fantastic husband I'll have as well. Elena Birken. I should start practicing" she chuckled as she kissed him again.

"It's not for a few more months remember? The day before your birthday. You know, I tried to sneak into your house while you were out here to see your wedding dress. Your mother nearly walloped me with a frying pan cause I tried to sneak into your attic" he chuckled. She pulled away and poked him in the chest and he laughed harder.

"Hey! No peeking! You can't see it until the big day!" she pouted and looked almost hurt.

"I'm sorry, I just couldn't resist. I knew it would be dazzling" he chuckled.

"Hey, I don't get to see your tuxedo, so no doing that again ok?" she asked him with her eyebrows cocked. He nodded and leaned his forehead against hers.

"Hey, I heard you might have a big day tomorrow, don't worry I don't know the details, but you should get some sleep. I asked Dr. Wright a minute ago if you could stay a bit longer than the others before you go do what you need to do tomorrow for breakfast. Say yes?" he asked. She sighed and nodded.

"Ok" he said and they both got ready for bed. Andy slipped under the covers and pulled Elena close as he slipped off to sleep, though Elena lay there thinking. It was only two months before they'd be married. The Sangheilios trip would be quick, and most likely she'd be sent home with Andy for the wedding. They'd then go on their honeymoon and be able to relax for a bit. Then she'd probably be transferred back out or hopefully she could have a permanent position at Earth so she could be with her husband.

She started drifting back to thinking about the cavern and the reactors. If they didn't get the place working soon, they'd have to transfer control of it to another smaller fleet coming to do further research on it. She hoped it wouldn't stall their plans to Sangheilios any longer than it had to.

She closed her eyes trying to fall asleep as she thought about how the research was going. They had the reactors functioning, and it wasn't like there were any other dig sites they could find—were there? They didn't have the pods to place. She didn't even know how they could put new reactors into the new pods even if they ever found them.

She nuzzled into Andy's chest as he closed his arm around her and she drifted off to sleep. She'd leave the hypothesizing to Dr. Wright for a bit. She had done her part.

(Author's Note: Fluffy boring chapter aside from Kelly wiping the floor with Jackals next to two Spec Ops Elites. About time they get on OUR side. I guess it's a bit depressing for the team to realize their work didn't do much to figure out the base. Maybe there are other things they don't quite know about? Maybe it's a jigsaw puzzle? Please review!)

## 22. Don't Touch That Button

(\*\*Author's Note: Please read before starting this chapter. \*\*There are songs in which I found recently that I couldn't resist in placing here for some scenes. You can download them for free or go to youtube to look them up. I don't want to spoil it just yet with the names, but I can tell you the songs I put are not capable of downloading through iTunes at the moment or any legal digital seller. I had to use them and it definitely matches the whole story. It shouldn't be hard to find them, I could track them down easily in less than a minute. It's Ace Combat Assault Horizons OST. There are other OSTs on iTunes and other places you can download for the Ace Combat series, and frankly, I will be using some of the songs cause they are just too epic to ignore (I know they are other games, I just couldn't resist) Thank you.)

\*\*[0800 hours, December 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Orbiting Deliverance Colony]\*\*

Elena's door alarm rang. She popped open an eye and looked around then opened the other. Andy seemed to do the same and wondered who was waking them up.

"Don't answer, maybe they'll think we left" he mumbled. She ignored him and got out of bed, and then padded softly over to the door making no sound. She was wearing some blue Air Force pajamas as she checked the camera and saw Dr. Wright looking around at the door.

"Godâ€¦ I thought he was going to give us a bit of timeâ€¦" she said.

"What? I thought he said he was too" Andy replied and he got out of bed and walked over to her, not wearing a shirt and just his boxers. She opened the door and groggily looked at Dr. Wright.

"I know I promised you'd have some spare time my dear and I believe you haven't had time to eat breakfast or anything, but I had to inform you aboutâ€¦ ohâ€¦ hello my boyâ€¦" Dr. Wright suddenly stopped as he realized Andy stood behind her wearing just his underwear. Andy quickly got on some sweatpants and came right back to Elena. Dr. Wright looked at Andy as he stood there.

"What?" Andy asked. Elena looked up at Andy and smiled and stepped outside, and closed the door leaving Andy inside. Two marines looked from their guard positions at Elena standing in her pajamas staring at Dr. Wright looking disheveled.

"Ah, good. I think I know why it wouldn't activate! A signal! A signal from a Precursor ship to turn it on!" he told her pointing at her continuously and then moving his hand away.

"Alright, a signal, that's good. How does that help us?" she asked as her brain didn't seem to be awake yet.

"We have one Elena! We have a fighter we can take apart and place the communications algorithms into your fighter! We believe if we place it in yours, that with the improvements we've made it will turn the base on and work its magic! Or at least we hope it willâ€¦ Cortana is in the middle of testing the signals now and we are installing the equipment as we speak into the Black Blade Mk II. It should be finished by errâ€¦ noon! Err, 1200 hours? Yes, 1200 hours!" he told her grinning from ear to ear. She put her index finger in the air and spun it around, almost saying "Whoopdy doo I'm excited" to him.

"Once we have it ready, we'll go down and try it out. The digging is complete as well! You can see the cavern has been revealed. Now it's more of aâ€¦ errâ€¦ underground fort if you willâ€¦" he said trying to figure out a name for it.

"A bunker?" she asked. He nodded at her.

"Bunkers have roofs, but I see your point. That's good to hear. I'm going back to bed now" she told him and turned around.

"Wait wait! Aren't you excited?" he asked enthusiastically.

"I will be once I've gotten more sleep" she said and opened her door

and walked back in. She then turned around and smiled at him and closed the door.

"Sleep?" Andy asked. She nodded and they both flopped back into bed.

\*\*[Two hours later]\*\*

Elena woke up and took a shower followed by drying her hair and brushing her teeth. Andy had already gotten up and had gotten cleaned up.

"So, I found out from a little birdy that the dining hall is having a Christmas Eve breakfast thing. Pancakes and waffles?" he told her as he checked the terminal.

"Um, that's normal Andy" Elena told him as she put her shoes on.

"Yeah, but they don't usually have chocolate chips and powdered sugar on them do they?" he smiled.

"Depends on if your high enough in rank to pull those strings to get the sugar intake" she said bursting his bubble.

"How high in rank?" he asked curiously.

"Mmmm, Captain or equivalent. Captain Dare and I are the only ones who could pull that on this ship besides Admiral Hood, and neither of them have huge sweet teeth so I'm the only one who could do it really" she told him as she finished and stood up.

"So let's get some special pancakes" he said grinning as he got up from her terminal.

"I'm not a big fan of powdered sugar, but you can get it if you want" she told him and nodded. They walked out and down the hall to the lift. They descended and walked out and then walked into the DFAC.

"Hey hey! There she is!" Buck said as she walked in. They waved as she got in line for the counter and got her food. Andy asked for two helpings of pancakes with powdered sugar on it. The cook looked at him like he was nothing. He then pointed at Elena as she seemed oblivious to what he was ordering and seeing who was sitting at the middle table. It had become the hot spot for her friends and her to sit at. Corners didn't matter anymore.

The cook nodded slowly as he realized Elena was a Colonel, and went to go grab some powdered sugar. He powdered it on the pancakes and started to push them through the counter opening. Elena turned and pushed the pancakes away.

"None for me thank you, I'll have the bacon and eggs" she told him. The cook looked at Andy annoyed and set both plates on his tray.

"Wait, I can't-" he started to say.

"You ordered it, you eat it. There is no wasting" the cook growled.

Elena seemed amused at the entire thing. Andy looked at her hoping she'd take pity on him and eat the second plate of pancakes.

"You should have told me what you were doing Andy. You got yourself into that mess, you get yourself out" she giggled as he rolled his eyes and chuckled.

"My teeth are gonna rot out if I do this. Come on, throw me a bone here" he begged.

"Military grab what they can eat Andy. You can always go back for more if you're still hungry. There is no wasting of food here considering we rely on logistics to replenish it" she told him and walked forward in the line to get her coffee. Andy looked down at the second plate and sighed. They both got to the table, Elena's plate significantly larger than his, and sat down.

"So I hear you'll be doing the thing down near the thing" Aldric said, mindful of Andy being nearby.

"Yeah, it's gonna be interesting flying around while you guys are on the ground getting to see all the cool stuff happening. No Andy! I don't want them!" she suddenly said as Andy tried to sneak the plate of powdered pancakes near her. Fred sighed and pulled the plate to him, and then pushed one whole pancake into his mouth and chewed and swallowed. Everyone laughed at him as Buck grabbed the next one and inhaled that too.

"Wow, big mouths" Renee chuckled. Both guys shrugged.

"Powdered sugar is something we lower ranks can't get our hands on. Thanks for that bucko" Buck explained and patted Andy on the shoulder. Andy just sighed.

"I told you I don't like powdered sugar" Elena stuck her tongue out at Andy. He just rolled his eyes and started to pour his small cup of syrup onto his and digging in.

"So do you know yet what the effects will be?" Renee asked.

"I don't even know if it will work RenRen, your guess is as good as mine on this" Elena said as she munched on her bacon.

"If it doesn't, then we might just be missing one other thing down there. It seems like such a weird puzzle, or maybe a rubix cube. Fit things just right or it won't work" Renee said as she sighed and took a bite out of her apple. Elena nodded and pulled up her data pad's information in her eye HUD. She didn't like connecting to it much as it tended to block how she was looking at people outside of her fighter. The fighter's connection was streamlined to keep it out of her forward view. The data pad put things right in front of her so she could read.

Elena looked through the cameras that were mounted now around the open topped base. They swiveled left and right in a 180 degree traverse fairly slowly, and she noticed multiple slots around the lens. They looked perfectly square. She furrowed her brow.

"Something wrong Elena?" Aldric asked curiously. Andy looked at

her.

"What? No nothing" she said and turned off the HUD. This was another reason she didn't use it while she was talking to friends, as she was staring at Aldric oddly.

"You looked like you were annoyed at me" he told her.

"No, nothing, sorry, it's not what you think. I was just thinking that's all" she told him. He shrugged and continued to listen to Buck tell one of his exaggerated tales. Elena cued in as he was talking about her.

"So here she is right? We all now know she was pretty young when she did this, and she's taking on the best pilot on the ship in the game. And we all didn't think anything would really happen that he'd take her out in the multi. Well, she knocked us all on our asses and barely lost after taking the bastard out in the air. She lost by one second" he told them and laughed.

"Seriously?" Mickey asked and looked at Elena.

"Yeah, if I had flipped and shot straight by him instead of veering off I could have dodged those missiles and nailed that asshole" she grumbled.

"Wait, how did you lose?" Renee asked.

"His missiles hit me before my fuel tank ruptured in front of him. He didn't die until a split second after me" she told her.

"Wait, he hit your fuel tank?" She asked confused.

"I dropped it off right in front of him and shot off to escape, and his rounds punctured into it without knowing what he was shooting at. He thought he'd get me in the gut" Elena explained. Renee looked surprised.

"Now that's one hell of an impressive move" Jones said and knuckle bumped Elena.

"I was out of missiles, so I improvised with my own personal FAE" Elena chuckled.

"What were you flying?" Aldric asked.

"An F-390-B" she told him.

"That thing is ancient" he told her.

"It was the only thing I had at the time unlocked" she replied.

"What was the other pilot using?" he asked.

"A YF-1000 Sabre" she told him. Tom almost spit out his orange juice.

"Wow. You mean to tell me you took on a Sabre with something that is over two hundred years old?" Aldric looked at her astonished.

"Yeah. What's the problem?" she asked looking at everyone.

"Yeah! This is the look I gave her when she did that! What you guys are looking like! What'd I tell ya missy?" Buck said as he pointed to each person's face.

"It isn't that bad. I did alright. I still lost the fight" she told them.

"Yeah, but you nearly didn't. The odds of you surviving that were likeâ€¦ I don't know, but they were low missy" Buck said as he drank some of his milk.

"Oh come on, it's not that big of a story. I played a game and lost, ok. Change the subject" she chuckled. Buck put his hands up in defense and changed the subject to something else.

"How old were you when you did this?" Aldric whispered.

"I can't tell you" she replied.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Classified. It could change how people view me" she whispered back sternly. He seemed to be thinking with wide eyes as he sat back up after leaning over the table to whisper to her. Andy looked between her and Aldric.

"Something wrong?" Andy asked her.

"No, nothing is wrong. Don't worry about it" she faked a smile for him and he went back to eating.

After finishing their food, Elena escorted Andy to her father's medical room. He still wasn't well enough to move about on his own, so she had Andy stick with him. They got along quite well.

"See you two later ok?" she said and kissed Andy goodbye.

"You're coming up for tonight right? No long mission this time?" Andy asked.

"Yeah, I should at least. It's highly doubtful they'd tell me to go anywhere on Christmas Eve" she told him smiling.

"Ok. Well, have a good day" Andy told her and she nodded and walked out and down to the hangar. She got changed quickly into her suit and got inside her fighter. Her preflight checks were already done. She looked confused.

\_I'm ready. Trust me. Let's head out.\_

She smirked and definitely knew there was some sort of intelligence in the fighter now. She could almost feel the sensation at the back of her mind, but it never spoke to her directly. It wasn't like any other AI she had seen. It did everything it could to make her flying smoother, and let her still pull impossible actions out in combat.

"This is Raven 1-1 ready for burn" she said over the coms.

"Copy Raven 1-1, you are clear for burn" CIC responded. She was fired from the mag rail and shot towards the planet's atmosphere as multiple pelicans entered it. She flew right behind them as an escort as they broke through and landed while she slowly circled the base. She could see in magnification Dr. Wright walking around down below as the Spartans all lined up at the edge of the now completely open cavern.

"Alright, power is up, send the signal Elena" Dr. Wright said over the coms. She activated a coms transfer towards the area and the fighter translated it. She waited a few seconds as nothing seemed to happen.

"Cut the power" she heard over the coms as she cut her signal and Cortana stopped the reactors.

"What are we doing wrong? Cortana, are you getting anything new?" Dr. Wright asked.

"I'm receiving data transfer to the cavern. It is trying to respond. I thinkâ€¦ I think its denying access cause of connections. I'm getting fragmented code from multiple sources, I can't tell what from where or what's being sent, it's all garbled" she responded. Elena sighed and landed near the pelicans. She then got out and walked to the tunnel leading into the open cavern and got inside.

"Look, we've checked everywhere, and I'm telling you there are no more reactors. We've tried and we only can detect those thirty five out there" one ONI operative started saying as Elena walked in on the conversation.

"Maybe we need to double check to see if those conduits are fully connected" Dr. Wright asked.

"We wouldn't be getting this much power output if they weren't." Elena looked at the square holes lining the lens edge and looked at the smaller caverns connected to the now open base. She walked over to it as everyone seemed to be brain storming about what they should do. She looked at the large boxy columns sitting in the other room and narrowed her eyes.

"Hey guys!" She yelled. Everyone looked at her including the ONI operatives who were scanning the pods.

"What's wrong Colonel?" Admiral Hood asked.

"I think it needs more power" she told them.

"We have thirty five reactors Colonel, without sounding harsh, how much more power would you think it needs?" Hood asked, not being swayed.

"High Charity was connected to a Forerunner Dreadnaught Admiral, and it used 10 percent of its reactor power to keep the whole city functional. Somehow, I think she's right" Cortana told him.

"Then what do you suggest? We connect jump cables to the outside? Hell it might work" Buck asked. Elena looked daunted by his



words.

"I'm sorry Colonel, it's simply we seem to be getting nowhere. If you can offer a way to provide a connection to this thing to provide that extra power, I'm all ears" he told her softly.

"Those pods. They can carry reactors inside of them and slide into those" Elena said and walked over to the square slots near the lens. Everyone looked at the square slot.

"My dearâ€¦ I think you found out what we're missing. Those aren't buffering points, those are doorsâ€¦ we just couldn't get them to open because we didn't put the right object on top of itâ€¦" Dr. Wright told her and patted her on the shoulder.

"Part scientist, part pilot. If you say you're part Spartan now I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest" Buck chuckled.

"I think we are missing something though. How do we place reactors into those boxes?" Kelly asked. They all looked at each other.

"I wonder. Cortana, how did the forerunners enter and exit things?" Dr. Wright asked. Cortana looked like she was accessing information on her holo dais.

"Doors simply vanished when people would walk into them or merge around them Doctor. They're grasp of matter was much higher than ours" she told him.

"Then could an alien race higher than the forerunners do the same?" he asked grinning. She nodded and looked at Admiral Hood.

"Thank you my dear. Admiral, there seem to be seven of those containers in there. We'll need seven reactors down here" Dr. Wright told him.

"We have four right now for power distribution for lighting. I'll see if we can't get the other three" he said and started talking over the coms.

\*\*[1400 hours, December 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Deliverance Colony]\*\*

The containers were pulled out slowly from the second smaller cavern and put near the slots. Each reactor was being air lifted into the containers as the reactors seemingly disappeared into them slowly from the top. Once the reactors were completely inside, the air lifts attached to the pods and inserted them over the slots. Nothing happened after.

"This is getting ridiculous. Each time we find a piece to this puzzle, another stops us. Why is it this thing will not simply pull itself together?" Buck snapped.

"To make it harder for the enemy to use your equipment Sergeant. That's why" Admiral Hood told him.

"Sorry sir, just speaking out loud" Buck saluted and stood at attention.

"Cortana, could you power up the outside reactors?" Elena asked.

"Yes ma'am" she responded and did as she was told. The power coursed under the ground and towards the lens. Suddenly, the pods sitting on the square slots started to slide into them and seal up behind them, the tops of the containers blending into the metal—no, merging with it. There was a sudden continued connection as power flowed through the lens all around.

"Send the signals to the reactors in the middle" Elena said smiling. Cortana did so and the inner power seemed to glow brighter, and a loud whining noise seemed to charge up. It started to get so loud everyone could barely hear themselves think.

"Shut it down! Shut it down!" Elena yelled to Cortana as she disabled power.

"I somehow doubt that it's supposed to be winding up that high" Elena told everyone.

"Except the fact we have no idea how much power this thing actually takes" John suddenly said.

"True, but when did that stop us in the past Chief?" Cortana smirked. He nodded in agreement.

"Oh for fucks sake, I'm not in the air, that's why" Elena bonked herself on the head and walked out.

"Yeah, no signal to tell it what to do, so the power overloads. That's not a good thing" Mickey grumbled.

Elena got into her fighter and put her helmet on. It was still powered up and ready to fly. She turned on JTOL systems and hovered up and near the cavern.

"Ok, once more with feeling!" she said over the coms as Cortana turned the reactors on.

"Second stage activation now" she responded as Elena saw the power course through the lens again. She noticed the pylon towers charging up with electricity. She activated the transmission signals on the fighter and what they saw next was amazing. One of each of the metal shards floating in mid-air glided to the pylon towers and inserted into an almost impossible to see facing. As soon as they sealed on, a symbol glowed on that facing that they couldn't discern.

Nothing else happened beyond that.

"Alright, shut it down one more time" Elena said as everyone was cheering. The shards disconnected from the pylons and floated back to their original places, and the power stopped going through the lens. The reactors died down.

"So all we have to do is find the right translation to make all the shards connect and this thing will open, like a password" Dr. Wright almost whispered into his coms as he looked at Cortana.

"I'll get to work on it immediately" she replied and disappeared from

her holo dais.

"Well then, I believe this deserves some bubbly." Dr. Wright turned around and looked at everyone.

Elena landed again and sat there. They were almost done with cracking the enigma, they just needed one more push and it would be working. Then they would be ready to control whatever it was that was down there.

"This is Captain Dare to all ground forces! We have hostiles! I repeat, we have hostiles!" she suddenly heard over the coms. Her heart nearly stopped.

"Not fighters! Something larger! It just took out three UNSC frigates as it exited its portal! Scramble all pilots! Flash priority one!" Dare barked into the coms as Elena took off again without another word to anyone. She could barely see Aldric run out to the pelican and take off towards the Conundrum as she shot towards the atmosphere and broke through in record time. What she came upon was frightening. In the near distance was some sort of destroyer.

The large ship fired one beam at a Marathon class cruiser and carved it in half, ignoring the armor as it continued out the other side and hit a frigate.

"Son of a bitch! Rain of Fire and Wired for Peace are gone!" Dare said as the whole fleet didn't even wait for an order to fire at will. The Sangheili fleet opened up on it with all of their weapons as the shields it had took an incredible pounding. Raven squadron could be seen in the distance as Elena regrouped with them.

"Guess whatever you did down there woke that thing up!" Roberts said as they headed towards the ship. It was moving quite fast for something of its size as it flew through the fleet and tried to flank different ships. Two Sangheili frigates and a cruiser were destroyed in one torpedo barrage the likes of which Elena had never seen.

"Whoaâ€¦ I don't think I've ever seen that many torpedoes fired at one timeâ€¦ I don't think anyone hasâ€¦" Merricks whispered. It had already taken out eight ships since it had left slip space.

"All ships! Take that thing down!" Admiral Hood said over the coms, not able to see much from his position on the surface.

Elena shot towards the destroyer, not even giving orders as she engaged her PDWEs and engaged maximum afterburners.

"Wait, ma'am, what are you doing?" Roberts asked.

"I'm gonna be number one on its threat scale to keep it from taking anyone else out" she said as the destroyer fired on five other ships at one time and took them out. It was slaughtering what it could hit as the fleet moved to dodge anything it fired and returned fire. Elena shot towards it faster than all the others and engaged all stealth, as not even her own squadron could detect her.

The bigger they areâ€¦

\*\*[Music: Rio Hamamoto, Keiki Kobayashi â€" Dogfight from Ace Combat Assault Horizons]\*\*

The destroyer turned on the \_Conundrum\_.

"Brace for impact!" Dare yelled as it charged its weapons. Four Penetrators hid the beam emitters and blew them to hell as a small object shot off.

"Holy shit, that was Raven 1-1â€|" a coms operator softly said as the destroyer realized its shields could be breached. It turned and aimed at the small fighter while firing torpedoes at her, and Elena dodged quickly and lead them into a line. She knew more about her fighter than that hulk did. She activated her laser targeting system and re-engaged the torpedoes and sent them straight towards the destroyer. They crashed into its shields and destabilized them.

"Fucking hell, the shields are down!" A gunner on the \_Conundrum\_ whispered.

"Don't just sit there! Help her out!" Dare barked. Elena shot out and away from the fleet as the ship followed, considering her now top priority, a fighter versus a destroyer.

The Precursor destroyer continued after her as she led it on a merry chase beyond the fleet and then flipped around. The rest of the fleet tried to engage but was far too slow for either of them.

"I've taken down bigger assholeâ€|" she growled as it fired its forward beams at her and she barrel rolled and flipped herself and shot toward the side of it. Multiple defense cannons opened up at her as she dodged and locked onto a line of them. She fired multiple rail shots at each as they all popped like zits, oscillating the rails to continuously fire them without need to slow down. She then vectored her engines right over the side of the destroyer and pirouetted right across the armor, dancing. Each turn was dodging incoming rounds and she dropped another four Penetrators to lounge near the armor as she shot straight up and away from it, then flipped and charged her laser and particle cannons.

The Penetrators activated at close range and burrowed into the armor slowly, as Elena had disabled the automatic detonation for a modified drill. She wanted maximum internal detonation. She had no idea if there were multiple reactors inside.

"Let's see if I can get this right the second time aroundâ€|" she whispered.

\_I'll make sure of it.\_

She fired both weapons straight down as her scanners analyzed where she expected the reactors to be. The particle cannons damaged the armor severely and the laser struck, piercing and then detonating in a nuclear strike inside the destroyer. The missiles soon detonated after. She shot right by the side as the weapons stopped functioning and cut and ran. The resulting explosion was damned near a quarter the power of a NOVA bomb. The blast shockwave nearly knocked her off course as she flew away, only to regain stability and bring herself back into her intended trajectory, barely missing the explosion

radius.

The other fighters never even got a chance to open up.

"Fuck yeah!" Merricks cheered as Aldric had just flown out of the hangar in his Mk I.

"Son of aâ€¦ it's already over?" he asked bewildered. Elena flew towards the Conundrum without saying a word. Everyone else stayed outside for a potential second attack, running patrols except for Aldric. He landed as well. She landed quickly and opened her cockpit, and then tried to walk down the steps next to her fighter. She nearly stumbled as her center of balance was off somehow. Aldric was there in a flash next to her as he helped her get back up.

"Hey, hey are you ok?" he asked. She blinked rapidly as she tried to clear her head.

"That blast wave really threw me through a loop. Iâ€¦ I'll be fine though in a bit" she told him as she stood at full height and took a deep breath. Her vision slowly cleared to normal with no dizziness.

"Are you sure? I could take you to the medical bay if you want" he asked softly.

"No, I'm fine, really. I didn't expect the detonation to be that large when its reactors went critical. Don't worry about me, we need to keep focused on the damage to the rest of the fleet" she told him and he hesitated, and then nodded. They both looked out the window to see fires blazing on parts of the fleet. The destroyer, even though it had only been out for a few minutes, had taken out over fifteen ships and severely damaged another twenty with scatter fire. It had nearly taken out one fourth of the fleet in under five minutes. The only reason they survived was because she had retargeted the torpedoes it had fired and used them against its own shields.

They could see debris floating by as the hulks of the destroyed ships groaned and collapsed, the bulkheads and frames no longer containing small explosions.

"That thing was incredibleâ€¦ I've never seen a destroyer that could nearly wipe out a fleetâ€¦" Aldric whispered.

"I've never seen a destroyer that could ignore that amount of damage from other capital ships twice its size" Elena commented.

"Colonel Gripen to the bridge" they heard over the intercom. She took a deep breath and walked out of the hangar as Aldric watched her go, making sure she didn't just collapse again. She got into the lift and headed to deck two, and then went straight to the bridge. Captain Dare was literally waiting for her at the door.

"Good work, butâ€¦ you could have gotten there sooner" she said.

"Hey! I was on the surface for crying out loud! Don't pin the damage on me!" she growled. Dare put her hands up in defense.

"I wasn't blaming you, but you have to admit, it was convenient for

that thing to show up when you guys were fiddling with that thing down below" Veronica told her trying to calm her down.

"How were we supposed to know it would show up? We didn't even know if that thing existed! This means we need to get that base up and running even quicker now. There could be a whole fleet coming for all we know" Elena said as she gestured wildly in the air.

"If that happens we'll jump out of here immediately. You saw how much damage that thing did in the time it was out. It came directly for us, which leads me to believe it was set up for capital ship destruction" Dare told her.

"Could have fooled me; It had enough anti-fighter defenses to try and pick me off" she grumbled.

"But it didn't hit you. We're lower on the totem pole than they are Elena. That makes me believe if they really were anti-fighter defenses, they'd track a lot faster than that. It leads me to believe they were there to stop boarding parties or continue damaging other ships" Dare told her.

"How can you know that?" Elena asked.

"Because I've been at this longer than you have Colonel. I have far more experience in the naval department and how a ship would work" Dare growled.

"Sorry. I didn't mean toâ€¦ I'm not questioning what you know ok? You knowâ€¦ I wonderâ€¦ where are those two fighters we saw disappear last time?" Elena asked.

"I was thinking the same thing. They didn't show up to provide covering fire for that thing, which leads me to believe-" Dare started to say.

"That there's another one of those things. Shit. That is not good" Elena gave a heavy sigh and looked at the floor, hoping there would be an answer to their problems quickly.

"I got a coms message from down below stating the ground forces are fine by the way. Nothing attacked them down below" Dare explained.

"This is getting more and more hectic by the dayâ€¦ I hope those bastards don't show up on Christmasâ€¦" Elena said softly.

"If they did, it'd ruin the whole holiday. That base is top priority right now. The science fleet is coming with engineers, but that isn't until January. Now, I need to tell you something" Dare said. Elena looked at her confused.

"The Conundrum, despite your best efforts, still took some hits. Repairs are already under way, but he banged us on the head pretty good. Slip space is offline temporarily for us, but that's getting repaired as we speak. Something to do with stabilizing its fields." Elena really felt confused. The Conundrum was a brand new carrier with shields.

"Wait, the weapons punctured through the defenses?" Elena asked. Dare

nodded.

"Some sort of rotating frequency emission from those beams. Luckily, there's a tungsten and diamond layering on the outside of the Tritanium plate. We lost a few marines stationed on board from damage." Elena was astonished.

"Where was the damage concentrated?" she asked.

"Different areas, the thing was firing wildly. To answer your next question, your fianc  is safe. The brutes tried to break out temporarily when the ship was under attack, but they were neutralized quickly by the HAMMER drones. The guards were killed however." Elena just stood there taking it all in.

"One busy day isn't it?" Dare commented.

"Do you need my help with anything? I can fly a pelican remember" she told the Captain.

"Already enough tugs and pelicans out there right now. It should be fine. Go check on Andy, and then I'd strongly suggest to send a coms to the surface. Dr. Wright wants to speak with you" Dare told her. Elena nodded and walked to her quarters and checked inside. Andy wasn't there. She checked her eye HUD and then realized he didn't have a neural lace. She rolled her eyes and checked her terminal quickly to look for the badge he was wearing. The cameras locked on him in the entertainment room, with the rest of his buddies. It was in the middle of the ship, so it was the safest place to go.

She walked out and to the lift briskly, and then descended to the deck the room was on. As she opened the door, Andy saw her and came rushing to hug her.

"Hey, I was so worried about you" he whispered.

"Worried about me? Other way around! You got attacked mister! Not me!" she told him.

"You're ok right? I mean nothing happened? The fleet handled it?" Andy asked. Elena could tell him she went toe to toe with the destroyer and won, but it could scare the life out of him. She decided to lie.

"Yeah, the fleet handled it. Everything is fine. Just checking up on you that's all. Are you ok?" she asked as she pulled away and looked at him.

"We're fine" he told her. She nodded and looked back the way she came.

"I have to go back and assess a few other situations. Stay here until you get an all clear from the intercom" she told him. He nodded and she walked out and back the way she came. She prayed there weren't any more of those things to continue the fight or they'd be in big trouble.

She headed straight back to her quarters and got a communications link to the surface. She entered her passcode and let it read her neural lace ID, and got a connection to Dr. Wright.

"Ah my dear, I was worried about you. Everyone was in fact. Has everything been finished? Is everything alright up there?" he asked.

"Everything is fine doctor. The threat was neutralized. How is it going down there? Everyone calm?" she asked.

"Well now that they know what happened and the extent of the damage, not exactly. Admiral Hoodâ€¦ wellâ€¦ he wishes to speak with you" he said and there was a shuffling in the camera and Dr. Wright was replaced with Admiral Hood.

"Colonel, I'm authorizing the use of NOVA bombs if a fleet larger than that one ship comes in. We cannot afford to have those things rampage through our fleet and then take control of this planet. This is the best fail safe I can think of at the moment unless you can come up with a better idea. I've already alerted Captain Dare, and she agrees." Elena thought for a second.

"Understood sir, will they be launched from the ships or will my squadron be launching them?" she asked.

"Launched from the Conundrum. We need all of the available weapons on your fighters to be full for a potential attack, and a NOVA bomb doesn't do you any good in that situation. We're still working on the translation process down here, but I need to see to the Arbiter's fleet. They took a decent loss from that fight and I am seeing to the assistance it needs. They may scuttle some of the severely damaged ships" he told her.

"Scuttle? You don't meanâ€¦ they really don't know how to repair their own ships?" she asked wide eyed.

"Repairing hull is different from the systems inside Colonel" Hood replied.

"I know that Admiral, but they can fly their ships but can't repair something if it fails? What would happen if they're caught out in space with their slip space drive malfunctioning?" she asked.

"Then they die unless we can help them understand the physics required. This is why there is an alliance Colonel. They need us as much as we need them. They have more ships, more fleets and more troops right now, with stronger tech currently until we have completely learned from the forerunner tech the engineers are helping us with. We have maybe one hundred capital ships at most Colonel, not including prowlers. We cannot afford to lose what we have here."

Elena sighed.

"Understood Admiral. Is the base going to be reinforced?" Elena asked.

"More pelicans are already en route. The Arbiter was kind enough to supply two more Scarabs and a contingent of troops down here. It will have to do. I'll let you know if there is anything else I think of that involves you. Hood out" he said and Dr. Wright came back into the camera.



"Elena my dear, we have much to discuss. Cortana has been able to simulate the transmissions required to attach the shards to the pylon towers, but we still need your signal to completely activate everything. I think what we've been doing is not so much activating it as replacing circuit breakers into the electronics. Those reactors around the lens, they don't just provide power, they act like bleed off stations in some form. The shards floating in the sky? I believe they are communications for the base, access codes if you will. Your signal is simply a way to activate the whole thing once authorization is complete." Elena rubbed her eyes as she felt tired.

"This better be the last thing we have to do doctor, or I am going to go crazy because of that thing. I'm also wonderingâ€¦ are you positive it's a container?" she asked. Dr. Wright frowned and looked confused.

"What else could it be? We've stripped the other ideas away because they are inconsistent with the findings we have. What would you think it is?" he asked.

"I don't know, justâ€¦ if it's a base, then, some sort of weapon? Maybe it's like those halo systems the forerunners built" she told him.

"There are no emission controls for that my dear, Cortana has assured me of that" he chuckled.

"Maybeâ€¦ maybe it's like that place, what is it, the Ark?" she asked.

"Hmmmâ€¦ maybe. No, wait, that's preposterous. It isn't large enough to produceâ€¦ ohâ€¦" he thought for a moment.

"So it could build things like that Ark couldn't it?" she asked smirking.

"No, no no no, then there would have to be building materials. You couldn't build something without the resources being provided and this planet's scans didn't provide the required resources for an advanced ship or fleet" he said. She sighed and rolled her eyes, thinking of other things.

"What about that shield world?" she asked. Dr. Wright suddenly shut up.

"Where did you hear about that?" he asked curiously.

"I'm a Colonel, I'm allowed some leeway with classified information. Could it be one?" she asked.

"This planet is not built like a shield world, it is built like a planet, a natural planet. What is with this questioning Elena? Are you worried? Fearful?" he asked softly.

"I'm just wondering if these guys are ignoring something down there because of us doing it for them that's all. Who knows? Maybe they'll wait until we get the place running and then come and kill us all and take it over, and this latest attack was just to thin us out" she told him.

"You worry too much my dear. Calm down and think clearly. You yourself have defeated them multiple times already, and it is highly doubtful they'll be able to do what they have done in the past now that they are without a main ship" he told her.

"How do you know they don't have a larger fleet hiding somewhere?" she asked. He laughed a bit.

"Because Elena, if they did, why wouldn't they send the whole thing right now? We've practically repaired this place, and one ship nearly took out the fleet. If they wished to destroy us, they could have. No, I believe all that is left is those fighters right now. There might be a few more of them though" he told her.

"More? Like a squadron, shit I should have thought about that" she grumbled and bit at her finger as she looked away from the terminal.

"That is correct. You have only seen three fighters, but what is the average amount you would see?" he asked.

"Depends on the specialization of the squadron, could be six, could be eighteen or twenty four, could be forty eight for an assault cluster. God that would be scary if there were forty eight of those things out there€|" she told him and trailed off.

"I doubt there are that many, but I could at least see at least five more of them waiting for the right moment to strike."

"Then we need to not give them that chance. I'll head down there once I know everything up here is good to go. It might take at least an hour or more though" she told him.

"I quite understand my dear. We'll be fine until you arrive. Dr. Wright logging off" he said and cut the coms. She sighed and pushed at her bangs, and then looked at the two pictures that were now on her nightstand, the old one with her being thirteen and the new one with everyone now. She was worried some of them may not survive this entire operation with how complex it was becoming.

### 23. It's Not What You Think

\*\*[2000 hours, December 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/  
Deliverance Colony]\*\*

Elena slid out of her quarters quietly. She walked to the medical bay to find her father not there.

"Um, excuse me, where is my father please?" she asked the doctor on duty.

"Oh, he's been taken to the bridge to talk to Captain Dare ma'am. Apparently they're having a nice conversation about the past. They seem to be old friends" she told Elena. Elena looked surprised and smiled. She thanked the doctor and walked silently to the lift and then to the bridge. Jack and Andy were standing there talking to Veronica.

"Wow, and I thought I was good at stealth. How long have you been standing there Elena?" Veronica asked.

"Only a minute. I thought civilians weren't allowed on the bridge" she smirked.

"They're guests and Dr. Wright is technically a civilian as well, don't forget that. I may be regulations and rules most of the time, but I give some leeway to a hero for his efforts in the past and his soon to be son in law" she smiled.

"I've never seen a ship's bridge before Elena, this place isâ€¦ really complexâ€¦ I just sit in a fire engine cramped next to three other guys. There's more room here" he said as operators moved from one station to the next. It was still small compared to the Sangheili bridges, but it was easier to control with an AI assisting them.

"Glad you got a chance to catch a view of it. Hey, Veronica, I have to head down now. Wish us luck" Elena said smiling.

"Ah, you have to go?" Andy asked.

"Yeah, sorry honey, once we finish this, I'll be right back." Jack walked slowly to Elena and smiled.

"Doing research down there?" he asked.

"Dad, I'd love to tell you but-" she tried to explain but he put his hands up to calm her down.

"I know I know the classified bit. I understand, Veronica used that often when I transported her around" he told her smiling. Elena gawked.

"You took my dad's pelican? Where?" she asked astonished.

"Jack and I are old friends. I didn't trust anyone else to take me to places unnoticed. ONI considered him a valuable asset until that day he was captured. Under the radar of course. He's still Air Force after all" Dare told her.

"Wow" Elena said simply.

"Yeah, we even had permission from some group assisting the Air Force through the UEG. Never got the name of it, just had authorization" she told Elena. Jack smiled at his daughter.

"Hey, I'd love to stay and chat up on old times, but maybe later ok? Duty calls and Hood needs a report before the end of the night. I intend to have a very relaxed and fun day tomorrow without any problems" Elena giggled to everyone.

"You and me both" Dare chuckled. Elena looked at Andy and he noticed she was wearing the necklace.

"Yeah, I see those eyes wandering. I am wearing it. It's not regulation and you don't have personal effects in a war zone, but still, couldn't resist" she smiled. Dare smirked and shook her head.

"Hey, I saw that, and don't give me that personal effects, I've seen that ring you still have" Elena pointed at Dare. She immediately hid her hand.

"I don't know what you're talking about" Veronica looked away.

"Uhuh. So you reconsidered him huh? Just give him a straight answer this time" she told her. Dare immediately glared at Elena, but then softened.

"Be careful down there" she simply said and Elena smirked and nodded. She walked towards the bridge doors as Andy followed temporarily.

"Hey, she's right, whatever you're doing, I've seen the bustling around here. Be careful ok? Come back safe and sound. I don't want to keep that pinkie swear" he said softly. She turned around and gave him a soft kiss on the lips.

"I will. I'll do everything I can to get back" she told him and looked straight into his eyes. He nodded and gave her a small smile.

"I still haven't opened that second present, and you still haven't seen my face glow after opening it" she whispered low so no one could hear.

"Yeah. It's a special one too. You'll see. Hey, I love you" he told her softly.

"I love you too. See you soon" she said and walked through the door and to the lift. She waved goodbye to him and smiled as the doors closed.

The lift slowly dropped to the level her hangar was on and she walked out. Mechanics nodded to her as she walked by and she nodded back, as she knew all of them since she was thirteen. They were Ezekiel's crew, and she was friends with all of them.

"Hey Sunny, I thought you were getting some shore leave? Why didn't you go back with the supply fleet?" she said making small talk as she walked towards the changing room.

"Eh, I'll get shore leave once we're back. My wife's planning some trip for us" he chuckled at her.

"Good, gives you guys some time to be together. I'll see you later" she said and he waved and got back to work. She entered the changing room and saw no one around, and got undressed and put her suit on. She picked up her helmet and pulled out spare pictures she had tucked inside of it. Both were copies of the group photos. She was thinking of putting them in her fighter.

She walked out of the changing room and to her fighter.

"All loaded up ma'am. Ready when you are, like she always is" a mechanic said. She thanked him and climbed up the stairs and into her cockpit. She sealed it down onto its couplings and put her helmet on, then synched up. Elena then looked at the two photos and smiled. She

slid them into a small spot just to the top right of the control panels, out of the way of anything she might ever need to press. It didn't matter though, most of the controls were on her flight sticks or done by her neural lace, or even the AI she was positive had to be there.

\_Don't mind me; I'm not a backseat driver. Fly like you were meant to; like you were born to.\_

Her preflight checks were already done. Flaps and stabilizers twitched quickly, and she opened coms.

"Raven 1-1 calling CIC, ready for burn" she said as the platform slid her into the mag rail position.

"Copy Raven 1-1, you are clear for burn" she heard and took one glance at Ezekiel before the blast doors closed. He smiled and gave her a thumbs up.

"Raven 1-1, launching" she said and fired off the mag rail and towards Deliverance. She engaged her engines slightly and aligned herself to enter the atmosphere easily, and as soon as she was through headed for the cavern.

"Ah my dear, we just finished dinner, are you reading me?" Dr. Wright asked.

"Yes doctor, I copy. I'm almost there" she replied.

"Splendid. Now, Cortana and the others are standing by at the tunnel entrance, we hope this is our final action to activate this thing" he told her.

"Understood Daveth. Let's finish this" she said. She saw the power readings rise from the outside reactors turning up, and then the secondary reactors turning on around the lens. She sent her first signal to the base and watched the first shards connect to the pylon towers. The first symbol lit up as soon as they merged into them.

"First symbol up, nothing wrong so far" Cortana told her. She sent the second signal and watched the second group of shards connect to the pylon towers. A second different symbol showed up.

"Power looks good, I'm trying to translate the writing, but we can continue" Cortana told her. Elena acknowledged and sent her third pulse signal to the shards. They slid into place slowly as lightning currents sparked from the pylon towers towards the sphere.

"It's working! My dear it's working! Continue to the final side of the towers!" Dr. Wright said excitedly.

"Doctor, I think I have a partial translation of those symbols-" Cortana started saying.

"Not now Cortana! We will soon have the whole thing ready! Give the translation after it's complete! I'll be more than willing to read the entire alphabet once this is done!" he said as he watched with enthusiasm.

"Doctor, I don't think this is a container!" Cortana suddenly said as she looked like she was concentrating. John walked over to her and leaned over as did Renee.

"What's wrong?" John asked as Elena sent the final coded signal.

"No! no, we can't, it's not a container! COLONEL! STOP!" Cortana tried to yell.

"What? Oh crap, the signal already was sent!" Elena said worried.

"It's a portal! A transportation portal! You have to stop it right now!" Cortana yelled.

\_This is not good. Shut it down. NOW.\_

Elena sent a second deactivation signal as the shards merged with the pylon towers, but the signal was declined.

"Oh crap, it won't disarm! It's in transition phase! It's connecting!" Elena yelled over the coms. Everyone looked around at each other as the sphere rose a few meters as the power coursed to it. As if on cue, eleven Precursor fighters opened portals and shot through in the distance of space towards the fleet.

"Oh hell, battle stations! Scramble all fighters!" Dare barked as Andy and Jack literally tried to stay out of everyone's way. Dare didn't even notice them as she had far worse things to worry about.

"I need to head back up!" Elena told everyone as they heard the commotion going on upstairs.

"No! Elena! You have to stop the connection! Send the pulse once more!" Dr. Wright yelled.

"It's no use Doctor! Slip Space doesn't work that way! It's dialing a connection and it's found one! It's simply waiting for a response!" Cortana yelled at him.

"A response? Cortana, what response? From whom?" he said just as they saw the sphere flex.

"Oh no! we just opened a portal for the Precursors! they wanted us to do this! I'm reading multiple beacons engaged in the transportation through the portal! It's an armada!" Cortana actually looked horrified.

"Can't we do anything?" Elena snapped.

"Cortana, can you stop the connection in any way?" John asked.

"Don't you think I've been trying? They've locked it on their side! The only way would be to! we have to destroy this place! Severe the connection!" Cortana said softly as she thought.

"Destroy this place? This masterpiece? No! there has to be another

way!" Dr. Wright said sorrowfully.

"There is no other way! They have full control now! And unless we leave right now and put this plan in action, we'll be the first targets of the super carrier that is coming through that portal soon!" Cortana snapped at him. Dr. Wright looked at the others and then at the base. He sighed and took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes, then put them back on.

"So be itâ€¦ the greatest discovery since the forerunner technology, the halo arrays, the shield worlds, and we have to destroy itâ€¦" he softly said as the place hummed with power.

"We have to go now!" Cortana said and John took her chip out of the dais and put her in his helmet.

"I haven't been in here in a while, you're a bit cluttered now" she said as he ran with Renee and the others.

"I have a lot on my mind at the moment" he told her.

"No kidding. Elena! I have a copy of myself trying to slow down the transition, it should give us enough time to get back to the ship and perform a sterilization procedure" she said as she connected to Elena's fighter.

\*\*[Music: Namco Sounds â€" The Unsung War, Ace Combat 5: The Unsung War]\*\*

"Sterilization? Oh godâ€¦ we have to use the NOVA bombsâ€¦" she whispered as she continued to fly over the cavern as the contingent of Elites ran to the Phantoms and the Scarabs were literally abandoned for the pilots to get inside Phantoms or pelicans leaving. It didn't matter which.

"This is ground force Alpha calling all UNSC and Sangheili naval forces! We are issuing codes Bandersnatch and Omega! I repeat, issuing codes Bandersnatch and Omega! All forces evacuate immediately!" Cortana said as the pelicans lifted off. Equipment was literally abandoned in the base as everyone ran to get away to lift off and to the ships. Renee ran as fast as she could as arcs of lightning rippled from the sphere and struck the ground at different positions. The rest of her squad ran as fast as they could to the pelicans and escape. It was utter chaos.

"Oh god oh god don't let us dieâ€¦" one of them said as they strapped into the pelican's seats as it lifted off. The Spartans charged into their own pelican and got off the ground immediately.

Elena was shocked. Bandersnatch meant radiological or energy based disaster, and Omegaâ€¦ it meant everyone needed to cut and run, no matter the cost. It meant they were guaranteed to be overrun, not just fight and lose, utterly slaughtered.

She shot towards the atmosphere and escaped quickly to see the fleet engaged in a fire fight with eleven fighters carving into the ships as UNSC fighters engaged them.

"We need cover out here! These things are tearing us apart!" Jones barked as he shot after one and opened up with every missile he had.

The shields failed on it slowly as each one hit, the fighter not even caring as it was already firing at two Long Sword IIs and cutting them completely in half. Elena shot towards them to engage quickly as Aldric led the rest of Raven squadron against the remainder with Seraphs and Sabres.

Jones followed closely as the fighter shot around the side of a Sangheili carrier and opened up on it with his cannons as it flipped and returned fire. He dodged and rolled, slower than a Black Blade as a grazing part of the beam connected to his shields and knocked it down by half.

"Damn that was close!" he whispered as he continued on its tail as a hail of Vulcan rounds flew towards it. The rounds punched partly through its shields, and Jones could literally see them flickering as the nanites partly burst against it, trying to weasel their way in while their buddies were lying on the armor chewing away. Elena was in the game.

"Nice of you to help out girl! I got a pest problem!" he said as she leveled off next to him.

"Solving the problem" she replied as they both shot towards it, opening up with their cannons as it dodged where it could. It couldn't keep away from both, and even though Jones's guns weren't as strong as Elena's, they were whittling its shields down. It opened fire after it flipped straight at Jones and Elena leapt in the way and took the hit. The beam glanced off the angled shields and curved over her, the shields lowering by ten percent.

"Improved defense and he still can drop them fast!" good thing there aren't more than one on me right now!" she whispered to herself as Jones got around her and fired. The fighter weaved around a frigate as they continued their chase, she firing her rail guns as he locked on again with his guns.

"I need a rearm girl, think you can take the others after this?" he asked.

"Count on it! Let's just take this guy out! I'm righteously pissed here!" she growled as they both opened fire, the shields failing on the fighter as both rail rounds and 30mm rounds tore into it, breaking the fighter apart as it fell towards the shields of the frigate.

"One down! Ten more!" Jones said as they weaved back to the rest of the dog fight. Jones veered off toward the Conundrum for a rearm as Elena continued on.

Aldric dodged a beam and noticed two torpedoes launch at him. He dodged as quickly as he could but two more came right at him. He fired two flares immediately and dipped, trying to keep away from the firepower engaging him. Sarah shot right by him and flared her engines, re-engaging the target lock of the torpedoes as they tracked her.

"Sarah! Don't do it!" Aldric yelled as worry filled his voice.

"I won't let them take any more lives!" she whispered softly as the torpedoes gained on her. Merricks happened to be aiming at them



however, and opened up with his micro missile launchers. The missiles arced through space and struck the torpedoes, keeping them off Sarah as she flew right back around and opened up on another fighter.

"Nice" Aldric whispered as Sarah wasn't letting anything happen to her squadron. Her family. Roberts came right next to Sarah, following her lead as she opened up with four Penetrators as he fired his laser at the next fighter, punching through its shields as the missiles passed it and hit the second fighter. Both of them opened up with their gauss cannons on the first as the second couldn't get a clear shot behind the first one, but the missiles struck the second right through its shields and sent it spiraling out of control. The gauss cannons punched into the first fighter and blew parts of the craft completely off. Three down, eight to go.

Three Precursor fighters came down from above as they tried to flank Roberts and Sarah but Aldric and Merricks as well as multiple Sabres wouldn't allow it. Merricks opened up with a volley of aerosol grenades and micro missiles as he waited for the fighters to turn on them, and the Sabres unleashed a volley of medusas trying to drop the shields. Three beams opened through the aerosols and scraped against their shields as they tried to dodge, but the cloud of dust and reflective material lowered the damage significantly. The upgrades were definitely valued now. Aldric rolled around the side of the cloud and fired his Vulcans to get the fighters to dodge to the other side, and just as they did the medusas struck while Merricks charged his particle cannons.

The shields whittled down on two fighters as the particle cannons hit and carved into one, blowing it away as Aldric fired two AGM-10s to finish the second off. The third flipped and took his AGM-10s out but he was still firing his gauss cannons quickly at the third, keeping pace with it. The second one tried to regain its shields but the Sabres were hailing rounds onto it, keeping them low as Merricks unloaded the last of his micro missiles straight at it. The fighter lost control and crashed into the armor of a Paris class frigate and blew, carving a sizeable chunk of armor out of the ship.

"Shit, sorry!" Merricks gulped as they continued towards the rest of the fight. Five down, six to go.

"Pelicans are on board! We're allâ€¦ oh godâ€¦" Dare suddenly said as everyone tried to look at the portal near the surface. A nose was slowly coming out of it, very slowly as a beam shot out of it and carved through twelve Sangheili ships in one shot.

"Holy shitâ€¦ I've never seenâ€¦" she whispered.

"I've got a power lock on that weapon! Its lost power after that shot! The portal drained it! We won't have to worry about another round but if we don't leave it'll get a chance later!" Cortana said over the coms.

"Get those NOVA bombs out there right now!" Dare yelled as the fighters continued to dog fight outside.

"Bombs? You mean plural?" Jack asked almost in shock. Dare looked at him and then at Andy, who looked rightfully scared.

Elena shot after another fighter, now somewhat faster than it as she got a lock immediately. She fired her laser on the pin point setting and dropped its shields and then opened up with her rail guns. The rounds pierced its armor quickly and it suddenly stopped functioning. Seven down, five to go.

"Elena! We have to go now! We have to load up!" Aldric barked out.

"We still have five targets!" she yelled back as the fighters tried to disengage but were being chased after by the last five. She opened up with her Vulcans as they reprioritized her as the primary threat.

"We have to make a run for it! If we wait around any longer we'll all be dead!" Aldric yelled as he flipped around and fired his missiles at multiple locks, unloading the last he had. The fighters flipped around and aimed at the missiles and took them out as Aldric was still flying backwards towards the \_Conundrum\_. They tried to engage Aldric but Elena opened up with her rail guns and they dodged quickly to a safer distance.

She tried to make a mad dash to the carrier but the fighters were starting to ignore her and head straight for the carrier, firing as they went. The \_Conundrum's\_ shields flickered as the beams struck. The bridge rocked as the shields barely held.

"Sitrep!" Dare barked as she saw the chaos around on her bridge.

"The shields are failing! If those things puncture, they'll carve us to pieces!" the shields operator said as he did everything he could to keep them functional.

"Damn it!" Dare gritted her teeth as Elena opened up on the fighters and tried to lead them away. They easily complied as she was considered a decent threat. The rest of the fighters flew towards their hangars as she headed out.

"I have to buy them time to get ready!" she whispered.

\*\*[Music: Keiichi Okabe - "Shadowlord (Crying Yonah Version), NieR Gestalt & Replicant]\*\*

Elena shot off quickly as they gave pursuit, firing at her as she dropped two aerosols and flipped, spraying her Vulcans at incoming torpedoes and knocking them out before they could come nearby, then headed straight towards the planet.

"Elena! What are you doing?" Dare yelled as Jack and Andy watched from the view screens.

"Buying the other squadrons time to land! And getting you your time to get those NOVA bombs out there!" she replied harshly as she dodged two beams and rolled, being grazed by another and seeing her shields drop to ninety percent again. Another struck and another. She was having difficulty keeping them from hitting her with five targets all coordinating to kill her.

"No! We're boosting the shields! We can probably make it with some

damage! Get back here!" Dare yelled as Elena flipped and shot right by the fighters, completely doing a one eighty and firing her rail guns at point blank to one fighter, knocking its shields out.

"Shut up already! If I leave, they come after you! I'm not letting that happen! I'm higher on their threat scale right now!" Elena said as she barrel rolled and moved her engines right under her and shot straight up. Multiple torpedoes tracked her as she locked onto them with her own laser targeting system and relocated the locks to the Precursor fighters. The torpedoes flipped around and a few struck while the fighters shot at her, and blew the remainder of them away. One fighter seemed to look damaged, but Elena never got the chance to finish it off as four other beams came at her and she ran.

"Elena! Don't do this!" Dare said suddenly with worry in her voice. The rest of her squadron was running to the bridge as it started to become crowded.

"Hey, too many here! Get out!" Dare commanded.

"What's going on? Why is Elena still out there?" Aldric asked as he looked between the view screen and Dare.

Elena engaged her PDWEs and rocketed across space as the fighters continued to attack, as she fired two flares and rolled, heading much further out.

"Elena! the bombs are out now! Get back here!" Dare growled.

"They have me fully engaged! If I cloak now they go straight to you!... god! no!" she sounded almost like she was going to cry. Everyone knew what was happening.

"Elena, we need to set those bombs! We aren't leaving you out there!" Aldric said over the coms.

Elena tried to think of a way to break away and escape. She could cloak and return fire on them, but they'd still head to the fleet and attack, hindering escape, and they considered Conundrum just under her priority. She could try and land on the mag rails they launch from, but she'd be caught outside while slip space happened and still be killed as her fighter was flattened against the wall.

We have our own slip space drive! WE DON'T NEED ANYONE TO ESCAPE!

"I'll disengage once you guys are away! I have a slip space drive, I can leave once the fleet is gone!" she said. Everyone looked at each other as she fought, the only fighter still outside now, with five on her tail. Her shields were down to fifty percent just as one of them struck her with a combined twin beam and she spiraled temporarily and regained control.

"Elena!" Aldric yelled as she flipped and returned fire with her laser, and struck. The resulting nuclear explosion knocked the fighters around and gave her some breathing room, but it didn't kill any of them, just knocked some of their shields down.

"I can leave after this! Set the bombs! I know what I need to do!" she yelled as her voice somewhat quivered. She could see in the

corner of her HUD the flashing warning telling her "Active Camouflage destabilized. Repairs under way." The twin beam must have done something to it when she was hit. She couldn't tell them it wasn't working right now or they'd never leave. They could die waiting for her.

"God you are so stubborn!... Are you sure?" Dare asked.

"Of course I'm sure! Jump out of here! I'll catch up!" she said as she went on the aggressive, trying to lower the amount of damage flying at her.

"You aren't going to let her do it are you? Please god no!" Jack said as Dare stood there, not responding.

"You aren't right? No! NO!" he yelled as he tried to run forward but two marines held him back.

"NO! GOD NO! DON'T LET HER DO THIS!" he screamed as he started crying. She was outnumbered and they were acting almost like they were abandoning her.

"Please don't do this! oh god! I'm begging you!" he sobbed as he watched the screen, Elena fighting for her life. She was good, but she had five highly advanced very powerful AI fighters tracking her, that didn't feel pain, that recharged shields quickly and were trying to work in concert to turn her into scrap.

"Captain, please!" he said as tears flowed down his face. Dare turned around and saw Renee and Buck standing there watching, saddened by what was happening. Andy was in pure shock.

"She's doing it for us. She'll be fine. She'll rejoin the fleet once this is done" Dare tried to say sternly but her voice was easily wavering. She could lose her friend.

"Captain! I! can I speak to her?" Andy asked. Dare looked at the others and nodded. It could be the last chance he had.

"Elena?" he croaked.

"Andy? What?... I'm sorry, but I have to do this!... you can't talk me out of it, or we all die" she said as she spiraled quickly, multiple torpedoes flying and missing, one hitting. Her shields flared as it struck, and the percentage dropped to twenty. She was getting pounded on faster than the shields could recharge.

\_I won't let you down, not like this. I'm diverting everything I can to keep them up. Just hang on!\_

"Elena! you have to make it out of this please. I am not keeping to that promise you hear me? I lied! I won't forgive you if you don't come back!" he said as his voice wavered, tears in his eyes.

"God you are such a child! You've never broken one of those to me ever!" she said as she did an Immelmann turn and spiraled then broke straight down, cutting through the fighters and making one veer off or it would hit her. It was a dangerous move, but she had to play chicken to keep them off her.

"I will break this oneâ€¦ I still haven't given you that present yetâ€¦" he said softly. He could hear her breathing hard as the stress of the situation was wearing on her. Her adrenaline was spiking and she had her cortex scanner almost maxed. Any higher and it could damage her nervous system. She was damned close to seeing in pure slow motion, using it to watch the charging of the beams and moving away, but it didn't always work.

"First layer shields down, engaging secondaries" they heard come from her cockpit. She was losing. Fast.

"Alright! I promise I'll come back! Just get out of here please!" she screamed as she dodged a torpedo and slid at an angle, two beams flying down right by her cockpit and one below it. They both barely missed her as she shot by and fired her thrusters, sling shotting in an arc around the fighters to spray her micro missiles, hoping to get some relief. It provided a few seconds at most as they broke.

"The presentâ€¦ what is it though? Just one secret you can break to meâ€¦" she almost whispered as everyone heard her.

"My parents, for the wedding present? They bought us a house. We can start living there when this is all done" he told her as she rolled and flipped, doing an obtuse roll thrust as a torpedo was almost on her tail and it shot by her as she continued in a different angle.

"After? What does it look like?" she asked as one operator nearby told Dare the bombs were now set completely and ready to count down.

"It's near the harbor, one of those big ones? It's got four bedrooms, and a living room and family room, and a kitchen obviously. A three car garage, and a basement and attic. We could have two of the bedrooms for the kids" he told her. Everyone stayed silent as he talked to her.

"You want kids? We aren't even married yet!" she said as she fired a burst from her Vulcans, hearing them spin empty after two seconds. Out of ammo. Her heart sunk as she swapped to missiles and fired two Penetrators and struck one fighter hard, sending it careening into another and bouncing off, sparking but still halfway powered, trying to spin itself. Everyone saw the attack and got a burst of hope as she fired her particle cannons at it as she swerved to dodge another beam. One of the fighters shot in front of the particle cannon beams and took the hits. The damaged fighter worked to repair itself as she lost her chance and ran.

"That's right. I want two. A boy and a girl. How's that sound?" he asked. The operator motioned for Dare to get a move on. She nudged Andy and told him she had to get \_Conundrum\_ to jump out. The rest of the fleet was already doing it. Jack sat broken in a chair hearing the whole thing. His daughter was nearly sacrificing herself to protect them. Milo was hugging him as he tried desperately to keep himself from losing it too.

"Fine! Fine alright! We'll have kids! You talked me into it! It sounds great as long as it's with you!" She was nearly crying and laughing at the same time, just as she engaged her photo cell paneling to throw off locks and jumped out of it. She didn't want it

on too long or they might lose interest.

"Ok. I'm holding you to that. You come back alright? And then I'll show you the house" he said as Dare cut in quickly.

"Coordinates are sent Elenaâ€¦ good luckâ€¦ you better damn well make it outâ€¦" she almost whispered. Jack looked up from staring at the floor and saw Elena's screen in the corner. Her bangs could be seen spread around her face under her bluish visor, no polarizing needed inside. She was watching god knows how many HUD details, they couldn't even tell what she was looking at.

"Come onâ€¦ ha ha, you can't kill a ghost guysâ€¦" she laughed as Dare smiled, knowing that.

"Like a Spartanâ€¦" John whispered as Renee looked up at him.

"Alright, stand by for slip" Dare said as the engines wound up and the ship shot into the eleven other dimensions.

Elena could see the last ship, her ship, the Conundrum, slip space out with all of her friends and some of her family. They were gone. She looked at the portal in the distance, another part of the ship popping out and she could see a fin. It still couldn't fire at her, but she didn't know how long she had. The bombs were ticking, and she just had to keep them away until they were at ten seconds. She only had twenty seconds to worry about now.

She looked at her HUD and checked her systems. "Active Camouflage system operational. Slip space drives offline. Repairs under way."

Her blood froze almost. She couldn't escape. Even if she could take out the fighters in time, the bombs, not one, but five of them, would vaporize her. There wouldn't be any debris, she'd be absolutely gone. She almost cried at that point, but the tears would blur her vision.

I'm so sorry, I truly am. I'm working hard to repair it. Please keep hope. There's got to be a way. Some way damn it.

"I'm sorry Andyâ€¦ I'm so sorryâ€¦" she just about lost it. The fighters were moving towards the bombs as they concluded they were ordinance. She opened up on them to keep their threat scale aimed at her. She was down to four missiles, her Vulcans were empty, she had one more volley of micro missiles and her particle cannons were restabilizing after so much use. Her laser was on cool down. The only abundance of ammo she still had was her rail guns and her EMP cannon, which was slow to hit, though didn't need a charge up. She had six flares left and four aerosol grenades. Her first shield was trying to restabilize as her second shield was already down to thirty percent. If they punched through, they'd hit her first layer armor, most likely carve through that immediately and hit the second layer, which would hinder the remainder of the damage and barely keep her up. She doubted the auto repairs could keep up with any further pounding after that. She'd be killed.

"So this is it then? I don't even get some damned miracle like we had before with the Covenant? Wow, god has got a twisted sense of

humorâ€| she whispered to herself in a chuckle as tears fell down her cheeks. The fighters closed on her as she shot away and around the bombs, waiting for them to blow. Ten seconds. Nine. Eight.

Suddenly, one of the fighters emitted some bubble out of it as the others closed on her. The bubble fighter stayed still as the bubble grew very large, very quickly, engulfing the area of space they were in.

\_Something isn't rightâ€| the timer, they stopped time! It's a stasis bubble!\_

Elena could barely move. She was caught in the bubble with the Precursor fighters as they closed on her, as all of the timers for the NOVA bombs stopped.

\_Not happening!\_

She could barely feel the fighter strain to break the grasp and rotated through thousands of frequencies to get her loose from the time warp. The fighters charged up their weapons and just as they fired, a frequency match was foundâ€| by the Precursor transmission system. She rocketed away and left as the beams barely missed her, but the fighters realized what had happened and gave chase, as the bubble emitting fighter slowly moved towards the bombs to try and disable them.

"Oh shitâ€| this can't be happeningâ€|" she said to herself as she weaved back towards the fighter that was slowing time to nothing. The other four fighters did their best to keep her away. The time fighter was slow, very slow, almost putting all of its energy to maintain the field. She had to figure something out soon or it would disable the bombsâ€| and kill her and the rest of the fleet after her.

## 24. Hero's Stand

Elena thought for a few precious seconds. She tried to figure out how to destroy the four fighters in a sound amount of time before the fifth one disabled the five critical WMDs. If she didn't do it quick enough, then everything she knew would be wiped out. She ran ideas through her head quickly, firing one missile per fighter and letting it burrow into them, but one of them might take two while defending its buddies and destroy that tactic. She thought of firing her EMP cannon at one and then shooting it quickly with her rail guns, but again they'd defend each other.

Each plan she had race through her mind was shot down. She needed something to decoy or make them veer off, and she was out of Vulcan ammo. She couldn't use her missiles to make them run in the directions she needed because she needed them to punch through their shields. She had hope of taking out two before she would be sitting on just her particle cannons, laser and rail guns, and that would be far too slow to finish them off before the fifth took out the NOVA bombs.

She didn't feel helpless, but she was at a point where she could feel she was in a lose lose situation.

\_Wait! There!\_

She noticed a slight ping in the distance that was floating in space. At first she thought it was debris from the twelve ships that were destroyed, but she magnified quickly as the four fighters charged their beams. Sitting there, floating like a beacon of hope, was a rearmament cache. Cherry must have jettisoned it before they jumped. That AI was still looking out for her. She'd still have to fight towards it though, but if she could get to it, she had a chance. A slim one, but a chance nonetheless. "Laser operational" she heard the systems report as it was off cool down.

\_Lady Luck just winked at you and bet. Don't let her lose.\_

\*\*[Music: Two Steps From Hell "To Glory"]\*\*

She flipped and headed straight for the first one and fired her laser right at the first fighter. She saw their beams fire at her and she knew she couldn't try and dodge or the laser would miss. "Shields diverted to frontal cone arc, rear shields disabled" she heard come from the systems.

\_I won't let it punch through. Do it.\_

The shields reflected a good portion of the damage, but her shields dropped dangerously close to collapsing, hovering at five percent. The laser blew them apart from each other as their shields failed. She had only one chance to fire and take one out before they'd regroup, and she aimed her rail guns and fired. They punched through the first fighter and sent it careening off into space, before exploding in a fairly large fireball. The shockwave could almost be felt. One.

She shot right by the others as they gave chase, recharging their shields as she went, however she dropped two aerosol grenades that created a cloud. As they flew through the cloud to get at her, she dropped four jettisoned Penetrator anionic missiles, which locked as soon as they were out of the cloud. The engines fired and hit almost at point blank, ignoring the shields and burrowing into the armor. They weren't enough to fully destroy them, but one was limping now, crippled. She was already flipped and aimed at them, charging her particle cannons as the missiles burrowed. She fired as they detonated, and took a second one out. She was completely out of missiles now, but she only had two to contend with. Two.

Elena saw their beams charge up as they kept away from each other, to slow her targeting. They were trying to adapt, but she only had half of them to handle now. If she was careful, her shields would have time to recharge enough to make it out of the whole thing.

She fired her rail guns at one as it dodged quickly, but she flew straight towards the second one. She was hoping against hope it would be against a ramming maneuver. Her shields just had one second to charge ten percent as the second tried to intercept. She fired her last two aerosol grenades and four flares, making it look like she was behind the cloud and then turned her active camouflage on, then rolled and shot just below the cloud. She immediately fired her last volley of missiles right through the cloud clustered tightly together, and she knew a swath of them would be knocked out, but it



would look like a large object moving through to attack. Her, or so the fighter would think.

\_Pelkin would have never seen that coming.\_

She flew down from her trajectory and then up, as the fighter fired its beam through the clouds and into some explosive ordinance. The remainder came at it and detonated against its shields as she fired her EMP cannon, now close enough and catching it off guard temporarily. The shields failed and she fired her rail guns, and punched right through it. Three.

The fourth fired and hit her as the shields aimed down to compensate, and the ten percent she had just gained was lost. She was back at five percent again. She had to be careful now, as she only had slow charging beam weapons and her rail guns now with two flares. She figured she could try and make a run towards the stasis fighter now, and try and veer it off. She fired a stray rail prong attack against it as it slowly went towards the first NOVA bomb. The rounds struck the shields as it tried to dodge and veered away. It bought her a few more seconds at the most. The attacking fighter came at her again, charging its beam. She flipped and fired her EMP cannon, not expecting it to hit. The shot made the fighter dodge, but it made the beam veer off course as she tried to follow the EMP round she fired, careful to not hit it herself.

The fighter wasn't going to use torpedoes against her, as since it was only itself fighting, it would simply give her ammo to use against itself. Elena had to figure out a way to hit the last one while she was in knife fighting range. She decided to make a charge towards the fighter as it charged its beam again. She fired her rail guns as it fired and she dodged, but it evaded as well as she aimed her particle cannons. "Restabilizing couplings. Particle cannons at fifty percent charge capacity" she heard.

\_Sorry, it's that or shields don't work.\_

She diverted the fifty percent to one cannon and shut the other off, and fired. The beam missed as the fighter dodged, but she had already swapped to rail guns again and fired. The rounds struck the shields and knocked them down by half, but it wasn't what she was aiming for. The rail guns created a small shockwave that knocked the fighter around, giving her just enough time to get close to it and fire her EMP cannon. The shields failed instantly on it, but the fighter itself was most likely hardened. Hers was, so she didn't expect anything less. She shot by it and dropped her flares right in front of its face.

The thing veered quickly away as it tried to restabilize its shields, giving her just enough time to flip and fire her rail guns again. One round hit as it was still moving, and somewhat crippled it, as she could see it hit and she was positive it struck its beam emitter. She hoped it would abandon the fight and run away, giving her time to take out the slowly moving stasis fighter. She had a chance now.

\_Go for it. Shields are diverted to the back just in case.\_

She ran for it, right towards the rearmament cache. The stasis fighter fired two torpedoes at her as the retreating fighter fired its own. Elena locked into the cache as it opened the sides of her

armor and pulled out burned out power cells and replaced them, and reloaded her ammo and missiles. "Shields charged to one hundred percent" she heard as the torpedoes gained on her. Her laser targeting systems were offline at the moment as any power surge while reloading could completely cripple her fighter.

\_Impact in two. One.\_

The rearmament was complete and she engaged her PDWEs, launching out of the cache dock as the torpedoes hit, dropping a flare right in the middle just in case, and they took the frame out completely. She veered around fully stocked again, ready to fight. What she came upon was the damaged fighter flying right at the stasis fighterâ€| and merging with it. The fighter grew larger and seemed much faster, though it now ignored the NOVA bombs and was watching her from behind. It was coming for her, and she knew it could fight without losing control of its stasis bubble now. She was surprised it didn't do this before and kill her quickly. Maybe it figured she wasn't as high on the threat scale as she expected. She was underestimated, just like Pelkin did so long before.

\*\*[Music: Namco Sounds â€" Zero, Ace Combat Zero the Belkan War (OST)]\*\*

"Alrightâ€| so that's how it is thenâ€| fine, let's dance" she smirked.

The Precursor fighter fired four torpedoes at her, and she dropped four flares. The thing fired its beams at her, now two as the damaged beam repaired itself with the merger, and she spiral rolled away.

\_Pelkin.\_

It fired four more torpedoes just as she fired her thrusters and flipped, and shot right by him and barrel rolled, catching two torpedoes with her laser targeting systems and dodging the other two, and all of them lost track. It wasn't going to have an easy fight.

The alien fighter aimed at her and fired both beams and she angled vertically between both as it tried to hit her, but she kept right between each.

\_What a bad dance partner.\_

The beams stopped and she barrel rolled and shot off as it gave chase, firing its beams and torpedoes. She was dropping her aerosols all over the place, creating a cloud as it fired at her in every direction, trying to hit her quickly as she simply evaded each shot efficiently. The fighter shot over her and tried to get her to veer like she had always done, using her own tactics against her.

\_Was hoping he'd do that. He's all yours.\_

It fired four torpedoes as close as it could as she was already opening up with her Vulcans and fired her micros. She dodged left as the ensuing explosion gave her a chance to drop four penetrators silently as she flew, and left them there with a remote link. She ran away as the fighter gave chase again, firing its beams. She dropped

another two aerosols as it fired its torpedoes, and she flipped, and shot straight toward them.

"This dance is over" she whispered.

\_And the curtain closes.\_

She charged right towards the torpedoes firing her particle cannons and destroying all of them as the fighter charged at her, and fired its beams at her. She opened up with everything she had, as it did the same. They shot straight towards each other as both shields dropped at the same time, damage ensuing to each. She activated her Penetrators and immediately jettisoned both of her micro missile launchers, almost full, practically right in its face. She dodged and ran as multiple torpedoes chased her, just as the fighter fired its beams and hit the missile launchers. The explosion tore the Precursor apart in front while the four Penetrators locked onto the Torpedoes and took them out.

\_Five.\_

"Seven seconds till detonation" she heard come from the systems.

"Alrightâ€¦ it's overâ€¦" she whispered and waited for them to count down and finish her off.

"Slip space drive functional. Gaining coordinates. Six seconds for charge up, request range from ordinance" she heard. She was astonished the fighter restabilized it. She still had to get as far away as she could though.

"Range requested is: Deliverance moon" she heard. She had to step on it before the drive would activate. Six.

She flipped and shot right by the NOVA bombs, and straight out into space, away from the colony as fast as she could. She was fighting for speed, pouring everything she had into getting away. Five.

\_Not enough speed! We're not gonna make it!\_

She looked at her range and then looked at the timer. She knew she wouldn't make it before they detonated. She had to think of something. She needed at least another second which she didn't have to reach the escape range for the drive to gain a clear coordinate lock. Four.

Elena thought quickly. She needed a boost, and looked over what she had available. She had beam weapons and rail guns and Vulcans, no flare launch or aerosol launch would help. Missiles, they could be used. Three.

She quickly engaged the missile fire systems but didn't let them disconnect outside of the fighter. She fired her upper thrusters to compensate for the push upwards as they opened up, a rocket assisted burst. Two.

"Please let me make it through thisâ€¦" she whispered. One.

The bombs detonated just as she reached the waypoint. "Slip space

range confirmed. Activating" she heard as the explosions rippled towards her. She barely entered her slip space tear as the surroundings started to become difficult to see. She saw her left wing rip off on her HUD's wire frame as the fighter lost its forward nose pointing and started sliding through the tunnel sideways.

"Damage, critical damage verified, coordinate data lost" she barely heard as she shot through the portal as the ripples were just barely on her. She was being knocked around as her fighter made it through the portal, but something was wrong.

"Slip space drive damaged, jettison requested" she heard through the rumbling and rattling of the fighter. She could barely control it as she was losing vision. Her defibrillator seemed to be beeping letting her know it was going to try and activate, but thenâ€¦ didn't.

"Slip space tunnel collapsing" she barely heard as everything slipped to black for her. The fighter was screeching from all sides as parts started to collapse outside and one explosion happened. She wasn't going to make it.

\_I guess it was foolish to think we'd live through this. We're not Spartans. I guess you'll really get the chance at having a pair of wings on you rather than a fighter Elena. I'm so sorry.\_

Elena felt at peace with no sound and nothing seen.  
Contentment.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Dare stood on the bridge waiting. She should have been back by now.

"Maybe she had to choose a different coordinate location because of where she was?" Jack tried to say as he looked at everyone. Dare looked at him and then at everyone else, and then to the viewscreen to see if a slip space opening occurred. Nothing.

"I'm not giving up on her yet" she said softly as everyone waited. An hour went by, two hours. Three.

"Noâ€¦ god noâ€¦" Jack whispered as he wrung his hands together as Milo hugged him. Still no sign.

"Alert is still up ma'am" she heard from one of the crew. Dare looked at everyone again and saw the worry on their faces.

"Ma'am, just received!" she heard as everyone looked at one crew member.

"Scanningâ€¦ I have it" he said as he swiveled around. Everyone waited for the information he was going to say.

"NOVA bombs confirmed detonation ping" he told them. Everyone was in shock. Still no slip space tear.

"She couldn't, she can't have lostâ€¦" Sarah whispered.

"If anyone could have made it out of that it's herâ€¦" Roberts

whispered back.

"She could have made it beyond the explosion radius before it hit" Dr. Wright told them.

"That's right! She didn't need to slip space to us, she might have needed to just gate out closer and away from the area!" Aldric said as everyone saw the spark of hope.

"Alright, we're going to let the \_Pathfinder\_ slip space in first as it's a stealth frigate, and report to us if it's safe" Dare told them. They all seemed to nod.

The frigate slip spaced out and disappeared. They waited as the time reached 2300 hours.

"Anything?" Andy asked.

"Slip space takes time kid, hold on" Dare told him. He sat down and remained quiet.

"We have a confirmation of no hostiles; the planet is pretty much an asteroid field. The portal is destroyed" they heard from the coms operator. Everyone sighed in relief as the rest of the crew cheered.

"Any sign of our fighter?" Dare asked. The operator shook his head.

"Then we head there ourselves. Prep for spin up, in five, four, three, two, one, mark" she said as they shot towards the old coordinates and then stopped.

The scene was of chaos. Both the moon and Deliverance colony were completely shattered into pieces from the range they could see.

"Any sign?" Dare asked as the crew scanned on all wave lengths.

"She's got stealth systems, she could be hiding" Merricks spoke up.

"That's true, just in case there are others. Send an all clear signal" Dare acknowledged and ordered. Her coms officer sent the signal and they waited. No response. Everyone's hope slowly died.

"It can't be! she isn't!" Jack whispered holding his head.

"Is there not one signal of any kind from those explosions? Any pings at all?" Dare asked.

"I have something! I have a faint ping! It's there!" the sensors officer said. Everyone looked at him as he gave the coordinates. They headed towards the spot, but were impeded by the now new asteroid field.

"We can't go any further without taking damage from those flying rocks" Dare growled.

"Ma'am! Permission to go out there and fly to the ping signal" Aldric asked. Dare looked at him like he was crazy.

"Denied! A fighter would have even less of a chance of surviving that overgrown hail storm!" she growled. Aldric stopped and looked hurt.

"We wait like we should do and let the field thin out a bit from their trajectories. We track the ping and hope for a chance to reach it" Dare told him.

"Hang on Elenaâ€¦ just hang onâ€¦ we're comingâ€¦" Andy whispered.

\*\*[Two minutes before midnight]\*\*

The asteroid field thinned out from the velocity they were set to from the explosions as Aldric and a tug shot out of the ship quickly, tracking the radar ping. He shot towards it quickly as the tug tried to catch up, not being nearly as fast as he was.

"Just hang on Colonelâ€¦ I'm hereâ€¦ we'll get you back I promiseâ€¦" he whispered to himself. The ping grew stronger as he started to reach the waypoint. Two asteroids came towards him as he fired missiles to blow them apart. He flew through the much smaller debris now and was almost on top of the ping.

"Sitrep Commander" Dare asked through the coms. He slowed down and turned, then activated all outside lights he had as the tug slowly came up behind him.

Floating lazily through space, with a few dentsâ€¦ was part of Elena's right wing. The one that didn't rip completely off. The rail gun was bent and smaller pieces could be seen nearby. Part of it looked melted, most likely from the bombs.

"Oh godâ€¦" he whispered.

"What is her status Commander?" Dare growled.

"Confirmed sighting Captainâ€¦ her right wingâ€¦" he almost whispered. There was some silence.

"Say again Commander? Did you say her right wing?" Dare asked as everyone looked at her, completely in shock.

"Copy that Captainâ€¦ it looks meltedâ€¦" he almost croaked. No one could say anything. They didn't know what to do.

"Is it possible that she just drifted further out with the runaway asteroids now? She might have zipped right by us" Roberts asked.

"It's possible. We shouldn't give up just yet, but the chances of us finding herâ€¦ are slim... I'll let the rest of the fleet know to come inâ€¦" Dare told them softly and nodded to the coms officer. Everyone sat there.

\*\*[0100 hours, December 25\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2553 (Military Calendar)/ Rim of Deliverance Colony Solar System]\*\*

They had sent tugs and other fighters out to scour the asteroid field, looking for her. They never found another piece of the fighter, and most of the crew started to think she must have been vaporized. Everyone had been removed from the bridge as Dare stayed to communicate with the rest of the rescue operation. Renee and the others all went to the DFAC and sat down with cups of coffee, waiting for notice.

"She's got to be aliveâ€¦ there's no wayâ€¦ you can't kill a ghost remember?" Buck asked everyone.

"We've all lost friends Eddyâ€¦ eventuallyâ€¦ we have toâ€¦ just accept thatâ€¦" Renee couldn't finish her words as her eyes were tearing up and she hid her face, crying. John hugged her close.

"Just watch, they'll find her, and she'll come walking right through that door, all smiles. Don't worry" Buck sternly said and pointed at the doors. They opened. Everyone looked astonished as Dare walked in, and they calmed down. Dare stood there with a very sad look on her face.

"We found something" she told them and took a deep breath.

"You found her location?" Andy asked. Dare sighed and looked at him.

"We were able to find her damaged reactor" Dare told them. Time stood still. Her reactor system was something that was right behind the cockpit. If it was damaged, it would have blown and taken her out with it.

"Noâ€¦" Andy mouthed as he literally started to cry. It was official.

Everyone looked at each other and tried to comfort one another as Dare stood there looking at the ground.

"They're still trying to scavenge for any parts they can find, but the evidenceâ€¦ is clear sadlyâ€¦" Dare pushed the words out of her mouth like they were cement. They had lost their friend.

"Andy Birken and Jack Gripen, as of this moment, the UNSC acknowledges your mourning of Elena Gripen and would understand if you, Andy, would not wish to go through with the mission to Sangheilios. Counseling is available and on standby" Veronica told them solemnly. No one else spoke. She nodded and slowly turned around and walked out. Buck got up and followed her.

"Iâ€¦ I think I need to be aloneâ€¦" Sarah was crying and ran out. Roberts got up and followed. Merricks just sat there as did Aldric.

"I can't believe it. She's dead."

\*\*[Eight hours later]\*\*

Everyone had slept little. They each retired to their rooms, including Andy. He sat down on the bed and looked around. Everything

still smelled like her. He could see her uniforms hanging in the closet, her hair brush sitting on the sink side. Her terminal was still in screensaver mode, with little jets flitting about. She hadn't turned it off.

Andy dry sobbed as he looked at the two pictures on the nightstand. One of them was taken mere days before. Her smiling face was immediately locked onto with his eyes. And now she wasn't around. He couldn't figure out what to do to go on. The woman he loved was gone now, and he had told her he lied about his promise to her.

"God damn it Elena, you told me you'd come back! GOD DAMN IT!" He screamed as loud as he could, angry not so much at her, but at the universe for taking the one he loved away from him. He leaned over and cried more, as the rest of his body felt numb.

Jack sat with Milo and Ezekiel in the hangar bay near the empty spot of where Elena's fighter should have been. It mocked them, telling them that the universe had taken her away from them. What lay in its place was the left wing, charred and damaged alongside the parts of the reactor. Her emblem was still barely visible through the damage. The right wing piece sat next to the left, mostly melted.

Renee sat cradled in John's arms in his quarters, just sitting there thinking as she cried about losing another friend. She had lost so much in the past, and now someone else was disappearing from her life permanently. Her nerves were frayed at the moment.

Aldric was beating against a punching bag as hard as he could, breaking the sides and letting the sand out, and then moving to the next, and the next. He was sweating heavily as he continued, not even stopping, worried if he stopped that his thoughts would catch up to him and the truth would be accepted.

Buck and Veronica just sat in her cabin, staring outside and watching pelicans move by. Veronica did what she could with a small data pad to keep in contact with her crew, but she had difficulty focusing.

Everyone's mind was on the one pilot that wouldn't come back. The one that had just saved them all by sacrificing her life for theirs.

\*\*[1200 hours, December 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2554 (Military Calendar)/Earth]\*\*

Admiral Hood stood at the front of the crowd all together on the grass. He looked around at the group of black dressed people as Elizabeth sat crying while Jack tried to comfort her. Andy sat nearby while Milo stood in the firing line. Elena's military friends all stood in single file nearby, Renee and John, Buck, Veronica, Ezekiel, as well as the other Spartans. Her civilian friends were sitting down watching Hood as he looked left and watched General Walter Daggerlin, the General of the Air Force.

Daggerlin looked at everyone in the rows, both standing and sitting, as the rain came down. Everyone looked over to him as he stood at the pedestal, watching.

"Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death,



>Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,<br>Pardoned his  
spilling mess-tins in our hand.  
>We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,<br>Our eyes wept,  
but our courage didn't writhe.  
>He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed<br>Shrapnel. We  
chorussed when he sang aloft,  
>We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.<p>

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!  
>We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.<br>No soldier's  
paid to kick against his powers.  
>We laughed, -knowing that better men would come,<br>And greater  
wars: when each proud fighter brags  
>He wars on Death, for lives; not men, for flags.<p>

We are here today to remember a fallen comrade in arms, one that gave her life to save ours in the face of impossible danger, held the line against a threat we could not have handled were it not for her courage to stay behind. Her memory will live on in all of us, empower us to do right by her and her noble sacrifice" he spoke, clearly and loudly for everyone to hear, regardless of the mic in front of him. Everyone doubted he needed it with his baritone voice.

He then stepped down as everyone was silent, and no one else had another speech. No one could get their voice to start. A board was set up with Elena's graduation picture set up in the middle, standing proud and looking towards everyone. She looked so confident, so in control of her destiny. It was heartbreaking to everyone that her life was cut so short.

"Arms!" they heard from a soldier in front of the rifleman file as they brought their rifles up to their chests.

"Ready!" he barked as they brought their rifles to their shoulders.

"Fire!" he finished as they opened fire three times, a twenty one gun salute. Elizabeth was openly sobbing now.

A bugler played taps in the background loudly as Raven squadron flew overhead, performing the missing man formation. Aldric flew off from the rest as Jones, Sarah, Merricks and Roberts continued on. Two Air Force officers folded a UNSC flag and then walked to Elizabeth as General Daggerlin walked to her.

"Ma'am, your daughter's actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of military service, her bravery in the face of impossible odds, reflecting great credit upon herself and the UNSC. The Air Force has lost one of its finest" he told her as she was held by Jack and Milo. Amber was crying behind them with Greg holding her, and Andy just looked completely dazed.

The officers handed her the flag and Daggerlin leaned in.

"I am deeply sorry for your loss Ms. Gripen. Would there have been any other way, know we would not have allowed her to do what she had done. Her skill, her courage in the face of unstoppable odds was unmatched from my point of view. Please, know that she will never be forgotten by the Air Force for her bravery, Brigadier General Elena Savona Esprit Gripen" he whispered, her posthumous rank increase

doing nothing to stifle the pain that everyone felt.

"Thank you" she sobbed out as he stepped back and Renee and the others saluted crisply. They had to, for Elena's memory they did the very best.

People started to get up and walk away as the rain continued to come down, the whole thing highly depressing.

"Ms. Gripen" Dr. Wright said behind them as he got up, his black bowler hat taken off as he carried an umbrella. She looked at him as Jack had his arm around her shoulders.

"I just wanted to say, that your daughter was an impressive woman, strong and utterly fearless. She knew what was happening, and did it anyways to protect us all. If onlyâ€¦ I just wanted to offer my apologies. There is still one last search going on, butâ€¦ it is doubtfulâ€¦ but I still hold some hopeâ€¦" he told her. She tried to blink away tears as Jack led her away and Andy stood there. Her face kept playing through his mind over and over, her last wave, her touch, her smile, everything. He wished he could see her just one more time in the flesh.

"I miss you so much" he whispered and closed his eyes. He could see her laughing with everyone as they sat around the Esprit, talking and drinking a soda in the hangar. Just like old times. He'd never get a chance to have her in his arms again now.

Andy slowly got up and walked with his parents towards a waiting limo, Dr. Wright walking to his car as everyone started to leave.

"You know, they're not gone after just one defeat" Daggerlin told Hood.

"I know. This is just a small reprieve. I only wish we had our top pilot to handle future incursions. That obviously isn't going to happen is it?" Hood said. Daggerlin nodded and looked up at the sky.

"Do you really think she's dead Terrence?" Daggerlin asked. Hood looked at him and smiled.

"The Master Chief was thought to have died, and we never had a body, and he's right here now, so... I honestly don't know. Unless we have full proof, it's best to believe the worst. That way the only thing we

expect is good news in the future, but it's best for the family until that information arrives... if it arrives..." Hood said softly as they both stood there.

"Indeed. The last search is going to be conducted early next year. I'll let you know if they find anything" Daggerlin told him and walked away.

"Walter, I've heard of a group that might help in that, but I don't know how they can do that. I believe you would know how to contact them and get the ball rolling. She deserves it" Hood said over his shoulder.

"I'll do what I can, but no guarantees. They're hard to talk to, and they find you, not the other way around" Daggerlin said. Hood nodded and looked up towards the sky again as Daggerlin walked towards his waiting car.

**\*\*[Music: Carly Simon " I'll be home for Christmas]\*\***

The Gripen family drove back to their home. Jack was told to stay after so long of being away. Elizabeth was walked into her house by Jack as Milo followed and walked upstairs. He opened Elena's old room and looked around, seeing her models floating from strings. Sitting on the window sill, looking old and worn, was the Long Sword interceptor, still looking as if it would take off if the window was opened. He opened the window temporarily, as if letting Elena's ghost go free. He was greeted with a slight wind as it stopped quickly, and he smiled softly thinking it was her. He closed the window and walked to the door, and taking one last look back, closed it.

**\*\*[Meanwhile]\*\***

Far in the reaches of unknown empty space, with no recognizable planets anywhere nearby, a small piece of debris floated lazily around. Hidden at the top, was a damaged cockpit. It looked semi frozen as inside held a pilot. Her eyes were closed with frost covering her face inside her helmet, cryo stasis active. The ion generator was still hidden just under the seat, reinforced and humming, keeping what little power it could as long as needed. A small message was displayed on one control panel flashing "Transponder damaged, SOS signal not functional. Distress beacon destroyed. Auto-repair systems offline."

"\_I'll be the best pilot out there! Next to daddy of course!\_"

The debris softly floated through the void, content with keeping its passenger alive until she might finally have her wings released again.

**\*\*The End\*\***

(Author's Note: I apologize to all readers, as this really is the end, and I'm sorry for it being shorter than all the other chapters. Most stories tend to reach about twenty to twenty five chapters average, sometimes longer, sometimes to fifty chapters for whatever type of book it is. Elena's story is complete now, she did her duty, and she's now cast adrift. Elena doesn't have the same luck right now as Master Chief has, as she isn't near a planet at all, and no one even knows where she is as the coordinates dumped her randomly. She has skill, not luck. She might not even be in the same galaxy. I wanted to tell her story and now it's told. She can sleep peacefully after showing what she can do, another hero in the long list that is in the Halo universe. If I get enough reviews telling me otherwise, I might tack on a legendary ending as a spare chapter after this, like the games do to be continued but only if the character is liked, or it will destroy the story. Some games continue making sequels that make the character hated, and I don't want to do that to Elena)

## 25. Legendary Ending

(Author's Note: Welp, I've gained quite a few reviews, I've gained PMs, and I've had multiple personal friends (as well as family who agree) that find this story quite enjoyable. I apologize to the readers; my previous author's note was a little screwy, so please forgive me for writing it wrong. THAT story for Elena is done, or should I say that PART of the story is complete. I had always planned to continue it in some form, I just didn't know how well she was received. It was mostly testing the waters if you will, going into an area that wasn't touched, meaning the sky.

I have a story playing out in my head with other characters that CAN save her, and they're kind of screwy, but that makes them fairly interesting to me, don't know about you guys (or girls.) New characters are being worked on in my head, ones that again go into an area that isn't much played with. Heroes never really work alone, there's always a group of people who play a vital role in the entire story, and these are just an expansion to the cast (like Ezekiel; he's a mechanic but he's the staple to keep Elena's fighter running; without him she never gets in the air. Plus, I had a sort of a Scotty moment with him.) One of them will become a main protagonist right next to Elena, just in a completely different way. I don't want to give away too much, but the story is already in the works, and as I said before, if I make a sequel, I don't want it to ruin Elena's part, so I'm trying to be careful. If reviewers wish to, they may send PMs giving some ideas (like KeyBladeMidnight, that scene was in my head consistently after you asked about her augments. I thought about that, the reason it never came up was the Precursors could be sufficiently advanced to potentially stop her from doing that, or maybe not, as it is entirely up to me (or readers given enough valid suggestion; A reader does in fact have some control, just like game players with game companies) to change that. I did take that thought to heart for next time, so don't worry hehe.)

IF everything works out as planned, Elena will come back, but she isn't an end all be all against the Precursors. It's gonna take a huge cast to handle them, human, Sangheili, or potentially Unggoy or Kig-Yar (maybe some engineers too.) You'll have to wait and see. Now, the Legendary Ending. Apologies, but since it is the Legendary Ending, it is small, so don't expect 5k words. This is sort of like an E3 commercial.)

\*\*[New Story, Legendary Difficulty, Credits Scroll Byâ€| ERROR CHECK DISKâ€| \*Kicks 360\* NO ERROR, SORRYâ€| Ending]\*\*

\*\*[Music: Epic Score â€" Someday I'll Be Redeemed]\*\*

The damaged cockpit slid silently through the void without any acknowledgement from the universe, an insignificant speck in a vast ocean of unnoticed puzzle pieces. Unknown constellations danced over the outside of the dented and scraped armor as if trying to coerce the occupant out to stretch her legs, maybe perform a waltz. There was unfortunately no response from the sleeping pilot within.

A large shadow slowly rose over the outside of the debris. One lone camera, with a cracked lens was still barely functional outside of the cockpit, connected to the top. The generator hidden below the pilot's seat sent just enough power to engage visual and see what was nearby. Hopefully it was not an asteroid.

The camera activated and tried to focus. A dark object came over the top and lit up a few outside running lights, but something was wrong.

The computer tried to activate with continuous glitching, running through available ship configurations just as a tractor beam attached to the cockpit. "Unknown configuration. Unknown alien capital ship. Previous encounter recognized. Hostile confirmed" the computer warned, but the pilot couldn't hear. She was in cryo stasis.

"\_Last time I checked we have our own secret agency, don't we?"\_

"\_Oh you could say that. They make ONI look tame in comparison."\_

There wasn't just one ship though. In the distance, hidden behind the bulk of the looming enemy, were two other ships, powering their weapons and one of them was not using projectiles. The second ship was definitely defending the small cockpit from the first, while the third seemed to be launching... fighters. Written on the side of the second ship, etched into the obsidian armor, barely visible at all, was one name. GRID.

**\*\*Raven Squadron: Pandora Protocols\*\***

End  
file.